

*Sing Me a Song of History: South African Poets and Singers in Exile,  
1900–1990*

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## Abstract

In this thesis I argue that poetry, for the South African poets and singers in exile in the period 1900–1990, was a highly symbolic agent which crossed the divide between verbal discourse and poetic form. Poetry embodied altruistic gestures and trusted encounters which became social agencies of change, reconciliation and hope due to historical exigencies, political imperatives and individual courage and sacrifices. By naming the condition of exile within literary representations of movement, travel and the diaspora, I am asking whether poetic representations of the South African exile validates a positioning of exiles' literary archives as a late modernist, ontological concern. I propose that this poetry, exilic poetry, intersects at all times with an altruistic intent that reinvigorates our ideas of humanism or humanisms. I consider the development and relevance of literary theories in South Africa and ruminate on the prose of Percy Bysshe Shelley, Paul Gilroy and Jacques Derrida in relation to the role of poetry in politics. By placing geo- and indeed bio-politics in our frame, we can comprehend the meaning of apartheid in terms of multiple philosophical positions which privilege the major disruptions, the main “isms” of our time: colonialism, humanism and the body politics that have arisen as a result of immense conflict. Apartheid was one such disruption, the after-effects of which are still *new* as South African histories are being torn apart and rewritten. Through all this, the poets talking to the people rewrote and wrote histories which we are still reading and writing. My thesis has considered whether there were specificities about South African exile which are revealed by looking at the relationship of poetry to exile. I have argued that these poems fall between the real and the imagined as trusted encounters, not as stories. Ultimately exiled writers and singers found the ecstasy of life in their poems or songs and in the fact of being alive, and in this sense they retained a sense of intense individuality despite their collective purpose. There is still much work to be done on the cultural mobility and transculturation that infuses these works with such a rich sense of altruistic, historical purpose.

## **Statement of Originality and Ethics Approval**

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, my own original work except as otherwise acknowledged in the text and notes. This thesis has not, in part or whole, previously been presented for a degree at this or any other institute of learning.

The University of Sydney Human Ethics Committee approved the protocol of interviewing participants for the purpose of this thesis over a five year period. Jeremy Cronin consented to being identified and his interview is included in this thesis.

Marian De Saxe

30<sup>th</sup> November 2010

*This history*

*Sing me  
A song of history*

*A tune or melody  
From the ephemera*

*Of words and worlds  
Trapped*

*Somewhere between  
The real and the imagined.*

*Let it flow  
From the work*

*Of the plodders  
And the warriors*

*Across guarded  
Borders*

*Of flight and anger,  
Composed by those*

*Who would not cry.  
Remind me*

*I resonate  
If only*

*As a representation  
Of some thought*

*From long ago.*

*And if  
In me*

*You find  
The heart's ground*

*Made solid  
By this recurring*

*Displacement  
Of soul from soil*

*Then sing again  
This history*

*Let memory  
Run free.*

# *Contents*

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| <i>Preface and Acknowledgements</i>   | <i>vi</i>  |
| <b>1 <i>Belonging to Exile</i></b>  | <b>1</b>   |
| I Was All Things: A History of Exile<br>Poetry, Memory and Exile<br>No Address: Theories of Exile   |            |
| <b>2 <i>The Heart of Exile</i></b>  | <b>32</b>  |
| The Story of a South African Exile<br>To Remind the Living<br>South African Exilic Poetry and Song  |            |
| <b>3 <i>Trusted Encounters</i></b>  | <b>58</b>  |
| Exile and Humanism<br>Politics and Poetry<br>Derrida and Shelley<br>Forgiveness and Altruism<br>Ubuntu and Poetic Humanism  |            |
| <b>4 <i>Language in Exile: Between the Real and the Imagined</i></b>  | <b>83</b>  |
| The Ecstasy of Being Alive<br>Encounters with Violence<br>Debating South Africa's Poetic Histories<br>Writing South African Literary Identities<br>Language in Exile  |            |
| <b>5 <i>A Constellation of Histories</i></b>  | <b>114</b> |
| Education in Exile<br>Human Rights in Exile<br>South African Influences on Rights Discourse   |            |
| <b>6 <i>Poets to the People</i></b>   | <b>152</b> |
| Planting Hope in Stealth<br>Prejudicial to the Safety of the State  |            |
| <b>7 <i>Write into the Night</i></b>  | <b>186</b> |
| Es'kia (Ezekiel) Mphahlele: Coming Home<br>The Melancholy Resistance of Arthur Nortje<br>Jeremy Cronin: Poet Politician<br>Vincent Swart and David Fram: An East African Encounter<br>Dennis Brutus in Defence of Poetry<br>An Altruistic Gaze: the Poetry of Breyten Breytenbach<br>Mazisi Kunene: Keeper of the People's Symbols<br>The Exiles of Ingrid Jonker and Bessie Head |            |

|          |  |            |
|----------|--|------------|
| <b>8</b> | <b><i>Singing a Way Out of Exile</i></b>                               | <b>259</b> |
|          | The Travelling Metaphor of Belonging                                   |            |
|          | Politics and Song: The Poetics of Connection                           |            |
|          | Becoming Our Histories: What Can Songs <i>Do</i> in the Face of Death? |            |
|          | <b><i>Epilogue: Sing Me a Song of History</i></b>                      | <b>290</b> |
|          | <b><i>Bibliography</i></b>   | <b>296</b> |

*In a sense this book is a collective epic. If it is read carefully, there is a story to it, a unity of growth and composition, facets of a single people.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Couzens and Essop Patel, "Introduction," in *The Return of the Amasi Bird*, eds. Tim Couzens and Essop Patel (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982), 14.

## Preface and Acknowledgments

My own empirical attitude toward experience tells me that as a South African product I have to attend more urgently and first to the defence of human dignity.

Es'kia Mphahlele, *Voices in the Whirlwind and Other Essays*

Making choices in our lives is one of the characteristics which make us human beings, and choice remains with us even as we face death at the hands of torturers – the choice to submit or to die in dignity. I have had to learn that the courage to take risks is not given to all of us.

Mamphela Ramphele, *A Life*

But these broken sentences  
stumble to heaven on the hill despite  
the man with the whip who beats my  
emaciated words back

They die, but  
at last  
get us all together as a vision  
incontrovertible, take me as evidence.  
Arthur Nortje, "Poem: South African"

### Preface

It is tempting to suggest that this thesis is a personal expression of nostalgia for the words of my compatriots whose poetry and song accompanied me from country to country on my own trek around the world. The personal infuses both the political action and poetic form of South African poets and singers in exile during the period 1900 to 1990.

A multitude of African poetics has populated the constantly shifting maps of Africa throughout the twentieth-century and has inhabited the history of South Africa's literary cultures with words of hope which have flourished in and out of South Africa in a hybrid synergy against hegemonic dominance and the language and structures of apartheid.

Poetry has always been a vibrant, energetic and important aspect of South Africa's cultural production and memory, a high-point of modernist representation and an inescapable adjunct of the escape from, the movement towards, and invention of, language and identity, defiant and defining, running from or to exile by engagement with distinctive, developing and shifting literary palimpsests, layering meanings of memory on relationships with words, people and history. South African poetry rests in the mine, the campus, the workplace, newspapers,



journals, the web, slim volumes, anthologies, tiny rooms or cells or elsewhere, the elsewhere relying on an audience to acknowledge the act (Shelley), the track (de Certeau), the trace (Derrida) and the train<sup>2</sup> (Masekela) that trundles homewards to the poem or the place or the person or people. Embodied in ideas of home are the hopeful social agencies of creation, transformation, reconciliation and imagination. In apartheid South Africa the African National Congress (henceforth ANC) invested particular political agency in the production of poetry; however, many writers<sup>3</sup> have proposed a broader notion of poetry pre-1990 as peopled, as communal, as travelling companions shifting in space and time incorporating African-Anglo, African-American and European influences to reach a point, as John Matshikiza wrote, where “I continue to move. My African exile has taught me that I am more than a South African . . . Somehow you find a way to stitch the textures of home and exile together.”<sup>4</sup>

Privileging the poet’s critical awareness of the communal as a trope in the poetry of South African exiles embeds (whether as a positive or negative force) the much contested, grand projects of humanism/s into the poetry considered in this thesis. Rob Gaylard’s contention that “the hope of constructing a democratic and caring society in South Africa” (I would add and elsewhere) “depends in part on a belief in a common or shared humanity to which one can appeal”<sup>5</sup> is the vexed question with which we must constantly grapple; whether we can or should locate a common ground and if so, what that might be. There are many literary publications devoted specifically to creating dialogues between cultures.<sup>6</sup> Usually ongoing impasses resulting from political issues challenge us to consider this question, as do the metaphors of home and displacement which dog our creative and critical writings stemming from and reverberating back to the political dimension. Apartheid (indeed many systems of indiscriminate domination) produced a legacy of violence which became a potent symbol of a past in which legislated and

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<sup>2</sup> “The train has always been a symbol of [loss] . . . the train was South Africa’s first tragedy,” said Hugh Masekela in *Amandla! A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony*, dir. Lee Hirsch (USA and SA: Kwela Productions, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> For example, Piniel Virir Shava, *A People’s Voice: Black South African Writing in the Twentieth-century* (London: Zed Books, 1989); Jane Watts, *Black Writer’s from South Africa* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989); Michael Chapman, ed., *Soweto Poetry: Literary Perspectives* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> John Matshikiza, “Instant City,” in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, eds. Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 238.

<sup>5</sup> Rob Gaylard, “‘Welcome to the World of Our Humanity’: (African) Humanism, *Ubuntu* and Black South African Writing,” *Journal of Literary Studies* 20, no. 3/4 (2004), 267.

<sup>6</sup> ISOLA - The International Society for the Oral Literatures of Africa, “Official Web Site of the International Society for the Oral Literatures of Africa (ISOLA).” accessed May 6, 2010, <http://africaisola.org/>; Aberystwyth University Mercator Institute for Media Languages and Culture, “Literature across Frontiers,” accessed June 25, 2010, <http://www.lit-across-frontiers.org/>.

state-sanctioned violence was employed to suppress, fracture and divide coexisting cultures. Yet through the apartheid years poetry written or created primarily, though not exclusively, in English became necessarily “normal” or “ordinary” (albeit symbolic) acts in much the same way that music or soccer were normal activities enacted in the public sphere. I will allude to the relationship between violence and subjectivity in exilic poetry in chapter 1.

This thesis adds to the critical rewriting of South Africa’s literary history as well as to the body of scholarship concerned with exile. Paul Gready’s book, *Writing as Resistance*,<sup>7</sup> covers similar ground. Gready’s focus is also on exile with a debt to the theories of Michel Foucault. He discusses the life stories of some South African writers, Bloke Modisane and Breyten Breytenbach amongst others, and examines the important role of the African National Congress in exile. We both cover the themes of writing as an anti-apartheid activity or resistance, with Gready concluding that the complex exiles produced by the apartheid state rendered or created writing as resistance, witness, testimony and “catharsis.”<sup>8</sup>

My thesis differs by considering primarily poetry and song. By naming the condition of exile within literary representations of movement, travel and the diaspora, I am asking whether poetic representations of the South African exile validates a positioning of exiles’ literary archives as a late modernist, ontological concern. I propose that this poetry, exilic poetry, intersects at all times with an altruistic intent that reinvigorates our ideas of humanism or humanisms. I consider the development and relevance of literary theories in South Africa and ruminate on the prose of Percy Bysshe Shelley, Paul Gilroy and Jacques Derrida in relation to the role of poetry in politics. I am mindful not to link together the very distinct voices of South African poets in a grand theme infused with a nationalistic identity of South African resistance culture; however, like Gready I cannot examine the South African poet-exiles without looking at how the ANC influenced the production of their poetry. Couzens and Patel’s description of black poetry in South Africa between 1891 and 1981 as being a “collective epic” is the contested problematic discussed here. Gilroy also reflects on the difficulties of writing the histories of black societies across the oceans when we seek influences and confluences beyond boundaries of nationalism, identity or culture. From these perspectives the poet in exile is exposed to the full burden of multiple histories converging on the act of giving poetic shape or voice to words and political contingencies. A sign that South Africa’s recent history has been construed more than once as an epic or a narrative is the appearance of this now-myth in a 2010 *Guardian Weekly*

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Gready, *Writing as Resistance: Life Stories of Imprisonment, Exile and Homecoming from Apartheid South Africa* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

article reporting from South Africa: “I asked if journalists had a kernel of nostalgia for the 1980s and 90s, when South Africa had an epic narrative.”<sup>9</sup> In response to this question Nic Dawes, the editor of the *South African Mail and Guardian*, mused on the contemporary “epic picture” and the “large narrative developing around the criminalisation of the state and the scale of the assault on basic governance.”<sup>10</sup> What lies behind these epics?

Images of movement have infused writing and theory over decades. I examine what this means for our writing and theories today and acknowledge those theorists who return to the words of the poets themselves. By discussing poets and singers whose exile and poems remain very much, in my reading, “inscribed in a critical experience of literature,”<sup>11</sup> their present and presence not a “ruin”<sup>12</sup> but rather an archive to be chronicled and acknowledged now, I hope to clamber then over belonging as a un-inscribed idea, to some extent to valorise not en/close uncolonized, explored and invented territories within a current of these writers’ altruism in which the self could often be subsumed in symbolism or propaganda. Literary negotiations of contesting South African interstices all contribute to current political debate on human rights and what it means to belong to or be welcome in a geographically and legislatively defined spatial entity, a country. Ultimately I agree with Pillay<sup>13</sup> that borders become cultural, not physical, and are defined by our own imaginaries.

The fractured and coexisting cultures of twentieth-century South Africa persistently produced gestures or symbols of hope represented by poems and other literary devices. The amount of poetry written by South African “inziles”<sup>14</sup> and exiles actually remained surprisingly consistent through the years of apartheid (with a burgeoning in the State-of-Emergency years of the 1970s and 1980s) as literary attempts to move beyond the colour of skin. That people and the issue of colour were manipulated with force and legislation for such a long period in South Africa’s history made the hopeful task of the poet even harder. Thus it is inevitable that the rewriting of South Africa’s history will take place over an equally extended period of time. We can perhaps be doggedly patient in conceding that the colonial/post-colonial dichotomy will still be referenced in current, theoretical writing however meaningless it is to writers who created

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<sup>9</sup> David Smith, “Reading Is a Closed Book in South Africa,” *Guardian Weekly*, September 24, 2010, 45.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 41.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>13</sup> Suren Pillay, “Where Do You Belong? Natives, Foreigners and Apartheid South Africa,” *African Identities* 2, no. 2 (2004).

<sup>14</sup> Sue Cullinan and Sello Mabotja, “South Africa: Sexwale, the Apprentice,” *The Africa Report*, March 22, 2010, <http://www.theafricareport.com/archives2/politics/3288675-south-africa-sexwale-the-apprentice.htm>. The ANC referred to its own people within South Africa as inziles.

new canons quite distinct from the remote generalisations and culturally specific meaning conveyed by the word “colonial.” Far greater patience is and was required by the poets, journalists, novelists, cartoonists, playwrights gesturing in their writing to a future that might not-be (or might not have been). Indeed Gilroy and others believe it is vital to analyse the ongoing consequences of the colonial legacy.<sup>15</sup> I am aware, however, that within South Africa many are tired of this rhetoric:

Moeletsi Mbeki, the political economist, admitted he was weary of that unholy trinity: colonialism, apartheid and racism. “If I never hear those three words again, I will go to my grave a very happy person because I think those three words tell us very little about what is happening in South Africa,” he said.<sup>16</sup>

I call representations of communal expression in the poetry of South African exiles a poetics of *ubuntu*<sup>17</sup> and altruism, poetry as representing a mood or mode of seeking coherence between an inner subjectivity and the creation of communal poems or songs. These poems were created both for survival and for future history, a becoming equal in South Africa regardless of whether they were written in or outside South Africa. By examining this body of work we can see how the poetic form was used through South Africa’s period of modernity and within the apartheid discourse to attempt to represent and create a sense of shared humanity or common ground.

Many South Africans accepted that they were living in exile *within* South Africa.<sup>18</sup> I will discuss this depiction more fully in future chapters. With the idea of exile as an emotional state we begin to see the relationship of exile to the idea of belonging; you can be exiled from a society within the geographical borders of that country by virtue of being excluded from participation in the society, either by legislation, banning, imprisonment, banishment or house arrest. Some poets within South Africa have been called “‘exiles within’ their homeland not bound by the schizophrenic demands of their own society or the fashions and fads of the world

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (London: Methuen, 1992); Achille Mbembe, “What Is Postcolonial Thinking? An Interview with Achille Mbembe,” *Esprit*, January 9, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, “Reading Is a Closed Book in South Africa,” 45.

<sup>17</sup> I have italicised the word *ubuntu* in the text this first instance only to indicate that the word is a Zulu word. However as *ubuntu* is now used commonly in all languages in South Africa, subsequent references are not in italics.

<sup>18</sup> For example, Arlene A. Elder, “ ‘...Who Can Take the Multitude and Lock It in a Cage?’ Noemia De Sousa, Micere Mugo, Ellen Kuzwayo: Three African Women's Voices of Resistance,” in *Black Women's Writing: Crossing the Boundaries*, ed. Carol Boyce Davies (Frankfurt a.M.: Ehling, 1989).

outside.”<sup>19</sup> Other South Africans would argue that this exile was simply normal or ordinary life.<sup>20</sup>

Does the idea of exile in the South African context give new meaning to our understanding of exilic poetry and the role it might possibly play in eluding conflict and trauma? The topic of exile affords the scholar the luxury of an unparalleled range of literature (here I use the term broadly to encompass Derrida’s poetry and belles-lettres)<sup>21</sup> and literary theory or criticism to discover insights across many histories and cultures. We have internal and spatial universes represented through the lens of the exile with which to investigate the broad means by which language is transformed into poetry and becomes public. How do these transformations arise? Was the poetry of South African exiles a poetic renaissance that represented the unity the ANC and others so desired and sought? I believe that, as represented in writing and song, the tropes of ubuntu, altruism, forgiveness and the translation of self and others (which often form the foundations of Truth and Reconciliation commissions) add meaning to the experience of exiles as well as to our ideas of modernism and modernity and can be read as powerful representations of South Africa’s history. State-initiated inhumanity produced active cultural representations of what humanness could be “where face-to-face interactions between people are still possible.”<sup>22</sup>

Interpretations of justice do not always embody the principle of political fairness or “caring” for others.<sup>23</sup> Engster reminds us that many moral philosophers have “focused their accounts of justice on protecting and promoting individual autonomy and equality while for the most part relegating caring to the private sphere.”<sup>24</sup> The conflict between the communal and private self at times overwhelmed some of the South African poets discussed in this thesis. Embedded in the idea of exile is also the psychological trauma that can occur when people commit themselves to the distant and remote possibility of social justice, even though the self can reclaim this justice by writing or by virtue of the assertion of humanness.

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<sup>19</sup> Farouk Asvat et al., *Exiles Within: An Anthology of Poetry* (Johannesburg: Writers Forum, 1986), back cover.

<sup>20</sup> Njabulo S. Ndebele, *South African Literature and Culture : Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994); Asvat et al., *Exiles Within: An Anthology of Poetry* .

<sup>21</sup> Derrida, *Acts of Literature* , 40.

<sup>22</sup> Gaylard, “Welcome to the World of Our Humanity’: (African) Humanism, *Ubuntu* and Black South African Writing,” 271.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Engster, *The Heart of Justice: Care Ethics and Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

I believe it is vital to place the South African exilic poets in a historical framework, therefore this approach will be visible, not only to add to the body of literature that already exists on these poets, but also to acknowledge the extensive literary debates within and outside South Africa to which these poets contributed, often with no patience for imported theory. In a forcefully persuasive article, Lewis Nkosi (a South African writer, academic and literary critic who was in exile for over thirty years and died in Johannesburg in September 2010) discussed the limited impact postmodern theory had on many South African writers and reminded us that the majority of poets had “no ready access to institutions of higher education where matters concerning literary theory, even in its rudimentary form, came under discussion.”<sup>25</sup> If I then “privilege” a socio-historical approach, this is a privilege (which-is-not-a-privilege) that South African exilic poets, denied many of what we regard as the social and political rights of a democratic society, might accept, and it is an approach made with reference to, and no judgement on, other approaches. Many literary and social theories centre on ideas of movement, asking and answering questions posed by exilic poets on exile, displacement, belonging and remembrance as well as placing quotation marks, as some poets do, over “naming”<sup>26</sup> in literary theory in relation to alterity and the specificities of location, place and time:

It is not folksy Miriam abroad  
or Christiaan Barnard...  
(the flesh lord)  
that fluted our music through the wind, transplants  
the lives seen in parentheses.<sup>27</sup>  
(Arthur Nortje, “My Country is Not”)

Nortje is here suggesting that living on<sup>28</sup> occurs beyond symbolic representations.

In the spirit of lives, and in acknowledgement of the constantly combative and changing literary debates in South African, my theoretical approach draws on a wide range of literary and social theorists such as Mphahlele, Nkosi, Attwell and Chapman as well as Bhaba and Said, the social theorists and philosophers Gilroy, Mbembe and Jameson and the psychoanalytic theorists, Kristeva and Fanon, as well as those whose writing is a personal challenge to me, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Jacques Derrida. Through the thesis my debt to these latter two writers will be

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<sup>25</sup> Lewis Nkosi, “Postmodernism and Black Writing in South Africa,” in *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid and Democracy, 1970-1995*, eds. Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 79.

<sup>26</sup> Victor Li, “An Ethics of the Name: Rethinking Globalization,” in *Between Ethics and Aesthetics: Crossing the Boundaries*, eds. Dorota Glowacka and Stephen Boos (Albany: State University of New York, 2002).

<sup>27</sup> Arthur Nortje, “My Country Is Not,” in *The Return of the Amasi Bird*, eds. Tim Couzens and Essop Patel (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982), 283.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Living On. Border Lines,” in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, eds. Harold Bloom, et al. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 75-176. A phrase used by Derrida in this essay.

apparent. My pleasure in reading Derrida, in addition to his metaphysics of writing and literature, derives from his love of, and playfulness with, language and words which always looks towards an undefined future. As Ahluwalia suggests, Derrida's systematic dislodging of self from origins and place<sup>29</sup> deconstructs dis/place/ment, meant, perhaps, and suited in most meanings of the word, to what Derrida could be, a study of exile. Some South African poets encounter, create and imagine the revolutionary Shelley as their declaration of continuity, not exile. Shelley, who remains an enigma for his experimentation with ideas and his ambiguities, an otherness or youthful daring which took his contemporaries by surprise, exerted an influence on modernist South African writers in a way that would have delighted the poet.

Problems of the distinction between the public and the private informed the Romantic poets as well as those of the modern period. There are compelling reasons for examining the relationship between the thought of a nineteenth-century English poet such as Shelley and the work of some South African poets in exile. Much has been written about Shelley's outspoken political views<sup>30</sup> and his theories of political reform have even been applied to the demise of apartheid in South Africa.<sup>31</sup> Shelley and the exiled South African poet Dennis Brutus both believed that ultimately social rights could only be achieved through committed action, which they regarded as a moving beyond the self, action growing out of the creative process. Shelley's appeal to a moral conscience raises questions which are still applicable today: who is the audience of the oppressed? Who defines this oppression? How do we decide to act or what does it mean to act? Since the first slaves brought testaments of their suffering to a divided public, written tracts or representations of exile and survival have drawn attention to the role culture has played in influencing political change.

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<sup>29</sup> Pal Ahluwalia, "Origins and Displacement: Working through Derrida's African Connections," *Social Identities* 13, no. 3 (May 2007), 10.1080/13504630701363960.

<sup>30</sup> Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran, eds., *Shelley: Poet and Legislator of the World* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); P.M.S. Dawson, *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); Stuart Peterfreund, *Shelley among Others: The Play of the Intertext and the Idea of Language* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002).

<sup>31</sup> Alan Weinberg, "Shelley's Humane Concern and the Demise of Apartheid," in *Shelley: Poet and Legislator of the World*, eds. Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996) 179-192; Merle A. Williams, "Shelley and the Soweto Poets: Projects of Resistance, Visions of Freedom," *English Studies in Africa* 40 (1997).

Accepting Parry's challenge for an "uninhibited critique of current practices in writing and criticism"<sup>32</sup> in South Africa, these theorists have become my undulating frame for ways of reading South African poets and singers who were forced into exile in the twentieth-century.

David Attwell has argued that "print culture" enabled black intellectuals to "establish themselves as modern subjects, in direct opposition to the identities ascribed to them in apartheid and colonial ideology."<sup>33</sup> However music as well as print culture, and black solidarity did more to create the double consciousness Gilroy defined. Attwell proposes adopting the Cuban Fernando Ortiz's notion of "transculturation"<sup>34</sup> as the means of understanding how a specific South African modernity was created, namely by using aspects of the colonial environment to subvert and hence create new discourses. The term implies the ruptures and fissures, the violence of transcultural contact, out of which is created a new discourse. Also applicable is Stephen Greenblatt's term "cultural mobility,"<sup>35</sup> the fusions and confluences of cultural adaptation and encounters over long periods of history. The notion of exile will necessarily incorporate transculturation and cultural mobility while following trade winds in directions which were intended to turn around and return to South Africa.

Attwell objects to a "uni-dimensional"<sup>36</sup> narrative of South African literary history charting the various literary movements documented by Chapman and others which, he maintains, take the diversity out of the historical moments themselves. Why then have I dated this thesis so specifically, as if to imply a historical narrative? In 1901 concentration camps were named for the first time in Britain by Lord Kitchener to describe enclosures created during the Anglo-Boer War. These concentration camps were segregated into black and white with women and children left stranded both outside and inside the camps as a deliberate ploy on the part of the British to destabilise the Afrikaner resistance. Concentration camps embody violence and state-sanctioned genocide. I chose this event as symbolic: the Anglo-Boer war had a long genesis and ended in 1902, but for the black population the resulting legacy and its effects were to last until the freeing of Nelson Mandela in 1990. In the course of almost a century, over 20,000

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<sup>32</sup> Benita Parry, "Some Provisional Speculations on the Critique of 'Resistance' Literature," in *Altered State?: Writing and South Africa*, eds. Elleke Boehmer, Laura Chrisman, and Kenneth Parker (Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1994), 22.

<sup>33</sup> David Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen Greenblatt et al., *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History*.



South Africans went into political exile.<sup>37</sup> From this diverse group of people came South Africa's poetic canon. By 1913, the rich literary culture of South Africa saw the first written (not transcribed) and published poem by a South African black woman.<sup>38</sup> Attwell suggests that studies of the theme of resistance to apartheid proper cannot ignore the actual construction of South African modernity. I would add to this that it was the literary and political relationships of South Africans in exile or *inzile* that established a particular South African modernity.

I have found that the breadth and scope of much scholarship and research into South Africa's literary history is as extensive and as varied as the historical circumstances which gave rise to such divergences. In time, these differences will also be used as artefacts of academic English literature studies' past preoccupations, one of which has been the changing nature of literary theory post post-modernism/post-colonialism/late-modernism. I believe my approach sits comfortably with Attwell's: where a socio-historical context is tempered by "an eclectic methodology that combines historical narration, textual description and analysis, comparative literary studies and theory,"<sup>39</sup> albeit, and understandably, with a very different eclecticism. I hope that, as someone once classified as a white South African woman and now engaging with literary theory informed by academic influences in Australia where I have lived for nearly thirty years, I have stepped, with my history, outside both my history and my immediate spheres of influence. Hannah Arendt paraphrases an ancient Greek sentiment, that "wherever you may be you will constitute a polis."<sup>40</sup> I have travelled hopefully.

This thesis is written in the full knowledge that all language and nomenclature has been contested and disputed in South Africa and indeed, it is this problematic that defines the arguments I put forth. In this spirit I hope I will be forgiven for two working definitions.

While much critical scholarship concerns the specific nature of oral poetry and the performative nature of poetry in South Africa,<sup>41</sup> I use the words "writer" or "writing" or

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<sup>37</sup> Christopher S. Wren, "Uneasily, South African Exiles Return," <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/12/world/uneasily-south-africa-exiles-return.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Adelaide Charles Dube, "Africa: My Native Land," in *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region*, eds. M.J. Daymond, et al. (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2003), 162.

<sup>39</sup> Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History* 21.

<sup>40</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, ed. Susannah Young-Ah Gottlieb (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 188.

<sup>41</sup> For example, Duncan Brown, "South African Oral Performance Poetry of the 1980s: Mzwakhe Mbuli and Alfred Qabula," in *New Writing from Southern Africa: Authors Who Have Become Prominent since 1980*, ed. Emanuel Ngara (London: James Currey, 1996), 120-48; Anne Fuchs, "Turn Again, Whittington!: Signs of Return to Form in the Work of South African Praise Poets," in *"Return" In Post-Colonial Writing*, ed. Vera Mihailovich-Dickman (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi BV, 1994), 139-52.

“literary” to refer to both written and oral poetry as well as song, except when signalling discussions which have relied on this distinction or when I make the point that exilic poetry in South Africa was usually written for an audience, and hence gained meaning when read with this performative aspect in mind.

The second definition is more complex and refers to apartheid. I recommend the article by Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon<sup>42</sup> on Derrida’s deconstruction of this concept.

McClintock and Nixon applaud Derrida’s commitment to the anti-apartheid movement, but contend that his simplistic deconstruction of the word “apartheid” negates the many racial discourses which make up the complexity of racial issues in South Africa. I have taken their warning to heart. For the purpose of naming and continuity of expression I apply the term “apartheid” generally to describe a system of legislated violence and oppression based on the characteristics of racial differences, while accepting and agreeing with McClintock and Nixon that “apartheid” was, and was not used, by the South African Nationalist Party after 1948 with varying degrees of deliberation. I loosely then define apartheid as the long history of racial discrimination in South Africa in the twentieth-century. In addition I do not wish to privilege apartheid as being the defining impetus for this thesis and for life in twentieth-century South Africa. Yet, much as many South Africans are quite naturally moving away from this discourse, the subjugation of people on the basis of colour was the reason so many South Africans were sent into exile. Apartheid was the major disruption in their lives. As recently as October 2008, some South Africans were split between the desire to continue to employ the language of the struggle against apartheid to fulfil the ANC’s Freedom Charter of 1955 of promised equality for all, and the strong desire to move on towards an active engagement with issues dominated by a new discourse and dynamic.

I have divided my thesis into eight chapters: the first four engage with literary theories by establishing what it means to propose exile as a central trope in South Africa’s literary history. What I am not doing is deciding on the authenticity of an exilic poet. I have chosen, yes, those exiled poets whose poetry has been with me for a very long time and others whose poetry I have discovered more recently.

To this end, chapters 1 and 2 explore the concept of exile which informs many literary theories (as well as philosophical, geographical and social theories) with metaphors of displacement, in-betweenness, fragmentation, travel and space, occupying and unsettling creative and critical discourses today. Some key theorists such as Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and others

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<sup>42</sup>Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon, “No Names Apart: The Separation of Word and History in Derrida's "Le Dernier Mot du Racisme",” *Critical Inquiry* 13, no. 1 (Autumn 1986): 140-54.

are examined in relation to ideas of displacement and belonging. I relate the idea of exile to South African history.

In chapter 3 I propose that by reading South African exilic poetry, we may discover what I have called trusted encounters between companions who start off as strangers to one another but whose thoughts and creativity across cultures and places, particularly in relation to politics and poetry and literary theory and practice, produce surprising insights. I introduce ideas from the work of Jacques Derrida and Percy Bysshe Shelley which I find surprisingly applicable to this study. I discuss the poetics of ubuntu and altruism, an unfashionable word anywhere in the last century, but one which can be applied to those who have the courage to take certain risks in order to better the lives of others. I argue that in South Africa these risks often involved writing as well as the “defence of human dignity.”<sup>43</sup>

I delve into the space between the real and the imagined in chapter 4, looking at a selected fraction of the critical discussions which debate South Africa’s poetic histories and write South African literary identities. I highlight those theories that seem to have most bearing on the notion of exile. I look at how the development of South African literary studies was informed by exilic poets and political agendas, both of which influenced creative and theoretical practice in South Africa. Who and what were the key figures, institutions or organizations responsible for cultural production? Applying a classic Marxist analysis of revolution, it was seen as essential for the ANC in exile to develop a cultural policy, to prepare an alternative culture in Gramscian mode for a new hegemony through alternative discourses or languages. There are now eleven officially recognised languages in South Africa. Successive governments in South Africa have developed language policies for various political purposes. Language was the trigger for the Soweto riots when the Nationalist government wanted to make Afrikaans the main teaching language in black schools. I look at language policies in South Africa and the politics of language which created metaphors about South Africa in the outside world.

In chapter 5 I follow with a brief survey of educational practices and the development of a human rights discourse in South Africa in order to show how speaking out and writing poetry were given agency as tools of survival. I discuss the history of human rights discourse with an emphasis on how South Africa influenced these developments both within the country and the United Nations (henceforth UN). I consider the way in which the ANC privileged poets and singers as agents of change often within a framework of rights discourse.

The final three chapters provide a reading of the poetry and song of exilic South Africans and suggest an audience.

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<sup>43</sup> Ezekiel Mphahlele, *Voices in the Whirlwind and Other Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1973).

Chapter 6 looks at the way poetry came to represent and speak to the community. For whom were the poets and singers writing and performing? While some writers only became poets during imprisonment, incarceration or exile, others were established writers at the time of their exile. Some writers were exiled within their bodies by the colour classification that created apartheid and this is reflected in their poetry, with influences from modernist fashions in writing and the black consciousness movement.

In chapters 7 and 8, this question is discussed in relation to the synergies between the literature of displacement and loss. I examine South African writers and singers whose poignant writing or circumstances seem to me to best exemplify an altruistic trusted encounter with the reader or audience. These are writers whose connection with one another is, at face value, the experience of displacement and the act of writing. I propose that representations of the moral responsibility of individuals and societies towards “the other” are defining moments of the exilic experience. I look specifically at the work of the following individuals: Es’kia (Ezekiel) Mphahlele, Arthur Nortje, Jeremy Cronin, and Vincent Swart, David Fram, Dennis Brutus, Breyten Breytenbach, Mazisi Kunene, Bessie Head and Ingrid Jonker.

“I am alien in Africa and everywhere” wrote Dennis Brutus ... “only in myself, occasionally, am I familiar.”<sup>44</sup>

To locate political and personal exile in writing, I offer a reading of the poetry of Dennis Brutus who was imprisoned and then exiled from South Africa for his opposition to apartheid. I argue that his poetry carries a representation of moral and altruistic responsibility which validates the nineteenth-century English poet Shelley’s defence of poetry as a medium of natural opposition to repression and inequality. Dennis Brutus’ poetry represents a journey to the heart of an exile. It seems to me not entirely inappropriate to find echoes of “everywhere” in Brutus’ writing as well as echoes of other South African poets’ exilic experience.

These are echoes which clearly confirm representations of self and otherness through writing as a political device that is both rhetorical and poetical in its urgency. For the exile, such cultural representations are a weapon, a defence and a rebirth. Exile as the natural antipathy to that trusted encounter that is poetry, becomes other than itself in its representations.

A Xhosa Methodist hymn written by a little-known schoolteacher Enoch Sontonga, with several stanzas added by the Xhosa poet S.C.K. Mqhayi, became the ANC anthem “Nkosi’ Sikelel’ iAfrika,” thus becoming one symbol of political unity, transformation and change in South Africa. The hymn took its place with the Internationale and the Marsellaise as one of the

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<sup>44</sup> Dennis Brutus, “I Am Alien in Africa,” in *A Simple Lust: Selected Poems Including Sirens Knuckles Boots, Letters to Martha, Poems from Algiers, Thoughts Abroad* (London: Heinemann, 1973), 121.

world's great freedom songs. It is hard to believe, as some commentators have observed, that there is now a new generation in South Africa that does not know Mandela as a *symbol*, neither as a symbol of the anti-apartheid movement nor as a symbol of unity and freedom, nor indeed the power of a song such as "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika." The image of Madiba is now one of the father of the nation, the bearer of wisdom and greatness. Each generation has new discourses and the old can quickly become unremembered or unwritten history. Discussion of what songs meant to South African exiles forms part of chapter 8 where I ask what songs can do in the face of the death that shadows the exile.

I conclude this thesis with a brief epilogue bringing together what I believe are key issues for future research into South African poets and singers in exile between 1900 and 1990.

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When I arrived in Australia, having grown up in South Africa and then lived in England for a brief period, I felt the chill any outsider feels when a wall goes up between the present and one's past, and you learn, doggedly, to live in the present. The past, most literally, becomes a parallel universe which sometimes intrudes, or is sometimes welcomed, into encounters of the present. Such movement across cultures and countries has been such a common experience in the modern and postmodern ages that it remains perplexing on one level that the body politic is still adapting, or is forced to adapt, to the effects of the currents of movement across our world. We have learnt that the idea of belonging to a society is fluid, that belonging travels, that it cannot be attached to countries if you want solidarity with your companions, but that while many people tend to travel with their nationalisms and cultural heritage intact, just as many travel now with what is assumed to be a global cultural identity. For some of us, speaking English or Mandarin or Arabic renders us indistinguishable in the eyes of others; we are no longer individuals nor part of the new community who expect you to make an attachment to unfamiliar modes of communication and landscape on day one, your own history intact, undisturbed but irrelevant. For many of us belonging attaches to no country but to where we subsequently make, or find, a sense of community, be it through memory, literature, food, fellow travellers, family, the politics of where we are, now.... or through those who travel with hope, to the unknown....

Symbols of our genealogy haunt us: for me it was poetry and politics, always both. In a box is a notebook where in my childish, though neat, handwriting I had copied Wordsworth's

*The Daffodils* from a school anthology. Many of the poets discussed in this thesis had the same literary education. Once I was old enough, my affluent upbringing enabled me to buy poetry books. These slim publications simply joined my life. Following the work of South African poets was a difficult but natural part of reading. In addition to the bookshops of Johannesburg which often placed embargoed books under the counter, banned poetry books could be bought in Swaziland and smuggled into South Africa at the bottom of a full tissue box; my heart also in the boot as the car was searched; the flicker of fear when policemen called at the house to investigate burglaries and cast an eye on the bookshelf, the forbidden books hidden in a locked cupboard. Here in the box is a copy of a letter to the Minister of Justice asking for permission to read Marx for study purposes. There are pamphlets from my days at Wits. Soweto 16<sup>th</sup> June 1976: we walked out of lectures to protest and our lives changed. Not an exile, but a hopeful emigré, my poetry collection travelled with me to London and then Sydney, growing extensively along the way, all the while deepening my sense of the importance of South African poets to an understanding of the impact of racial inequality.

This thesis has thus had a long gestation, governed primarily by a belief in the *act/uality* of poetry and the imagination, as well as the conviction ( though much contested) that humanism is still being fought for, and sought, to erase the necropolitics of race. I believe we have not yet fully understood our debt to poets, anywhere in the world, who struggled or still struggle with *this* burden of writing.

It is my belief and hope that this search for the broad belonging of humanness in human beings can continue to constitute a major dominating force in much philosophical, political and psychological enquiry, which, in the poetry of South African exiles exuded such a powerful altruistic gaze and gesture towards the future.

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A note on style: footnotes have been used in all instances except where there are several references to the same source within close proximity. When this occurs, the source is cited with a note which indicates that further citations of the work are given in the text

## **Acknowledgments**

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Over the course of writing this thesis, the following poets, singers and writers have passed away: Mazisi Kunene, Dennis Brutus, Lewis Nkosi, Es'kia Mphahlele, Siphon Sempala, Miriam Makeba, John Matshikiza and Jacques Derrida.

The singularity of your words migrates . . .

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## Chapter 1: Belonging to Exile

I talk to myself when I write,  
shout, scream to myself;  
.....  
knowing this way I can tell  
the world about what still lives...  
Bloke Modisane, "Lonely"

South Africa has projected itself as different, as special and as unique. The theoretical closure that comes with seeing South Africa as a closed space has resulted in seeing it as dislocated from the African continent, as not African.

Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael, *Senses of Culture*

I would say I grew up in exile and I've always been a part of the South African community wherever I have been.... Ghana was one big hodgepodge melting-pot, and the concerns of the South African community were also the concerns of the Ghanaian community, not just the government. So it gave one a chance to be not just confined to South African issues but also to engage in and be part of the development of what it means to be a free nation.

Linda Mvusi, "Interview"

I am calling on writers to realise that even when we were (using sloganeering poetry) we were addressing a key issue which is going to remain with the human race forever, and that is human nature and human relations. The crisis before us is about this, but so is the ecstasy of being alive.

Mongane Wally Serote, "Interview"

In this opening chapter I speculate on the role of literary theory as a passage in exile's dominance in many literary canons. I look at the history of the word "exile" and how this applies to South Africa as well as the philosophical episteme which assists us to understand our poets' representations of exile.

I agree with Gilroy that it is still the legacy of colonialism that we should confront in order to understand much inequality and discrimination around the globe as well as the effect this had on the double consciousness of exilic poets who melded politics and poetry to write. A study of concepts of exile in twentieth-century poetry and literary discourses offers new perspectives on exile as a trope in modern poetry. This chapter attempts to assess exile in the present South African context of rediscovering and rewriting South African history, in order to show how notions of nationhood, identity, belonging and citizenship have always been other than they seem in the context of exile. Poetic representations of these grand concepts are dependent on agency and reception for meaning. If South African politics passed through the equivalent of a postmodern moment, its literature remained firmly modernist as a dialectical opposition to the status quo.

Paul Gilroy, in all his works, constantly reminds us of the double nature of black consciousness as well as the apparent slipperiness of terminology, particularly in relation to the black diaspora.<sup>1</sup> Double consciousness, Gilroy proposes, is a state of consciousness that derives from being “both inside and outside the West.”<sup>2</sup> It is this awareness that informs the poetry of many South African exiles, whatever their skin colour, as the influences of their exile resonate with their experiences of oppression and violence. Gilroy asks: “Are the inescapable pluralities involved in the movements of black people, in Africa and in exile, ever to be synchronised?”<sup>3</sup> We do not yet know the answer. The symbolic value given to Nelson Mandela by the UN is aimed at a racialized world. Is Mandela’s image being used as a sign of the endurance of inequality? In South Africa, the symbol has given way to the familiar struggles of the modern nation-state with poverty and violence its most pressing concerns, the result of centuries of suffering. Gilroy sees the music of the black diaspora as a way of supplying “a great deal of courage to go on living in the present,” being as it is the product of “the history of racial terror in the new world.”<sup>4</sup> We clearly find this courage in the poetry of the South African exiles whose words assisted in the demise of apartheid and who actively pursued new agendas to deal with current social issues in South Africa. The pluralities of being remain problematic for those exiles who desired a response to “modernity’s counter-discourse for being consistently ignored.”<sup>5</sup> Exilic culture features prominently on the UN High Commissioner for Refugees web site.<sup>6</sup> The social problems caused by discrimination, poverty and inequality are so widespread that the perennial questions, to and for whom the exile is writing, still need to be asked and addressed.

### **I Was All Things: a history of exile**

I present a history of the language of exile as a metaphor for the crises of humanisms linked to our understanding and our practice of the concepts of nation and state. Poetry presented a middle passage for South African exiles. Given agency to define a national identity, a politically expedient necessity, this poetry also represents a personal story of exile which belies

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<sup>1</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 30.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>5</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 37.

<sup>6</sup> António Guterres, “Enduring Exile: Address by Mr. António Guterres, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to the High Commissioner’s Dialogue on Protection Challenges: Protracted Refugee Situations,” accessed January 28, 2010, <http://www.unhcr.org/4948c81f2.html>.; UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency, “Official Website of the UNHCR,” <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home>.

the weariness expressed by Thirwell, that “exile is a concept automatically tainted with a sense of sentimental melodrama.”<sup>7</sup>

Themes of longing, belonging, exile, difference, loss and displacement constitute powerful symbols of the twentieth-century, and are represented as such in literature and psychology. The thread itself, deconstructed by many post-colonial theorists as well as writers such as Felman, Derrida, Adorno and Benjamin, has persisted into the present with the emergence of holocaust studies, trauma psychology and the common discourse of the migrant experience. Poetry, by its very nature, represents a conflict between self and language whose antithesis is silence. This silence is an alternative to an expression of loss and displacement. For some South African exiles, the silence was also death by state-sanctioned violence, suicide or the death of comrades under apartheid. Many poems contain negative tropes or images of negation: “Our Dying Speech” (Zulu),<sup>8</sup> “My country is not” (Arthur Nortje),<sup>9</sup> “My people no longer sing” (Keorapetse Kgositsile).<sup>10</sup> In chapter 7, I will discuss how the language of exile reconciles private resonances with communal obligation. A trusted encounter, an altruistic praxis, is often created in situations of upheaval.

The noun “exile” was used in Hebrew (*galut*) as early as 597 BC to describe the “banishment of the Jewish people from their homeland and the state of mind produced by this.”<sup>11</sup> This definition still has currency with many in their dispute over territories in the Middle East. The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* also refers to the original use of the word “exile” to apply to Jews in captivity in the fifth century. Paul Gilroy<sup>12</sup> charts his fascination with Jewish thinkers in his attempts to understand black modernity, theorising that it was the idea of exile, of an exodus, that informed many slaves’ sense of identity. Jewish philosophers in exile, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and others, developed theories of culture in relation to both exile and the Holocaust, genocide being the extreme form of exile, the exodus become the execution. Paul

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<sup>7</sup> Adam Thirwell, “Unbearable Stardom,” *New Statesman*, October 23, 2000, <http://www.newstatesman.com/200010230039>.

<sup>8</sup> Zulu [pseud.], “Our Dying Speech,” in *The Return of the Amasi Bird*, eds. Tim Couzens and Essop Patel (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982), 61-62.

<sup>9</sup> Nortje, “My Country Is Not,” 282-83.

<sup>10</sup> Keorapetse Kgositsile, “My People No Longer Sing,” in *The Return of the Amasi Bird*, eds. Tim Couzens and Essop Patel (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982), 283.

<sup>11</sup> Louis Jacobs, *Exile*, Abridged and updated ed., Oxford Concise Companion to the Jewish Religion (Oxford: Oxford Reference Online, Oxford University Press, 1999), <http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezproxy2.library.usyd.edu.au/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t96.e205>.

<sup>12</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 205-12.

Celan, the German/Rumanian Jewish poet in exile in Paris, carried the burden of the Holocaust forever in his heart until his suicide: “whichever word you speak — / you owe to / destruction.”<sup>13</sup>

The Palestinians are now exiled from home in a similar region to the original exile. Some scholars believe the word “exile” is forever linked to its origins. The literary theorist Jacqueline Rose<sup>14</sup> and the writers David Grossman<sup>15</sup> and Amos Oz<sup>16</sup> return to the terrible trauma of the Holocaust to try and understand the modern Israeli state’s interventions in neighbouring Palestine and Lebanon. The writing emerging from Palestinian exilic poets sings with themes we find in South African exilic poetry. When Breyten Breytenbach met Mahmoud Darwish shortly before Darwish’s death,<sup>17</sup> both exiled poets expressed a solid belief in the role of poetry to bring about political change, though Darwish was understandably more cautious:

I thought poetry could change everything, could change history and could humanize, and I think that the illusion is very necessary to push poets to be involved and to believe but now I think that poetry changes only the poet.<sup>18</sup>

The years of living in exile, what Darwish called “absent, I come home to the home of the absent,”<sup>19</sup> took their toll on his spirit, but not on his hope for an influential role for poetry in our society. The Palestinian literary theorist Edward Said’s entire oeuvre is based on the plight of the Palestinians in exile.

We know that the word “exile” appears as *xotyá* in an English- Zulu dictionary dated 1895,<sup>20</sup> and that historians have followed the importance of the exile of Shaka, the Zulu king. The exiled poet Mazisi Kunene, who wrote in Zulu, felt this bitter plurality of exile, the straddling of cultures and histories:

I stood on the third world,  
Bitter, neither young nor old  
Heaving and heaving like a volcano,  
Multiplying with fire: I was all things.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Celan, “Whichever Stone You Lift,” in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 70-71.

<sup>14</sup> Jacqueline Rose, *The Last Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> David Grossman, *Writing in the Dark: Essays on Literature and Politics* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Amos Oz, *Under This Blazing Light: Essays*, trans. Nicholas de Lange (Cambridge, N.Y.: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> Breyten Breytenbach, *Voice Over: A Nomadic Conversation with Mahmoud Darwish* (New York: Archipelago Books, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Nathalie Handal, “Mahmoud Darwish: Palestine’s Poet of Exile,” *The Progressive*, May 2002, <http://www.progressive.org/mag/darwish0502.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Roberts, *An English-Zulu Dictionary: With the Principles of Pronunciation and Classification Fully Explained* (London: Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1895).

<sup>21</sup> Mazisi Kunene, *Zulu Poems* (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1970), 82.

In exile “Our lives were ruined / Among the leaves. / We decayed like pumpkins / In a mud field.”<sup>22</sup> Yet writing produces the energy and commitment to continue living as normal although in exile and you feel you decay. What is the state of mind produced by banishment? How is this emotion represented and translated in South African poetry? We find many recurring images in the poetry discussed in later chapters.

The OED lists the use of the word “exile” in 1300 as in “to be in exile,” here referring to a biblical notion: “a uoice...said...In egipte suld his sede exile In tharldon four hundred ere.”<sup>23</sup> These biblical overtones of a people, a community, defining themselves as in exile, resonated with the early Dutch and French settlers in South Africa. This idea of a chosen people in exile haunts Breytenbach’s writing in his books *A Season in Paradise* and *Return to Paradise*, as well as in his poetry where he mercilessly mocks and embraces his origins: “and the years dragged on and the pumpkin shrivelled and shrivelled.”<sup>24</sup> His “fascist” or “totalitarian” pumpkin (playing on the Afrikaans word for fool) is both himself and his jail warder.<sup>25</sup> Ingrid Jonker, an Afrikaans poet who committed suicide, deeply believed “My people have rotted away from me.”<sup>26</sup> Here exile becomes a rotten state, a feeling of banishment. Jane Kingsley-Smith agrees with the fictional Stephen Dedalus that in Shakespeare, “banishment is both the action which defines the canon and the reason for its existence.”<sup>27</sup> Is exile Shakespearean in its tragedy?

From the start, the only people in South Africa not in exile were the indigenous black population. It is useful for our discussion to conceptualize the history of South Africa in relation to the evolution of the historical concept of exile. The fifth-century meaning of exile in the South African context can be applied to the original colonial settlers as well as to banned or banished underground activists, for whom exile is both a banishment and a state of mind, although later free settlers were voluntary migrants. Nevertheless, from the seventeenth-century South Africa represented a melding of cultures as people from all over the world settled in the country or made South Africa, often by force, their home. For the Dutch Calvinists, religion helped create a biblical notion of themselves as the chosen people. There are many ways in which this image becomes contested in the South African literary field, with a rhetoric of

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>23</sup> John Simpson, ed., *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd, under revision, online ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), <http://dictionary.oed.com.ezproxy2.library.usyd.edu.au/>.

<sup>24</sup> Breyten Breytenbach, *In Africa Even the Flies Are Happy: Selected Poems 1964-1977*, trans. Denis Hirson (London: John Calder Ltd, 1978).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 113-114.

<sup>26</sup> Ingrid Jonker, “I Drift in the Wind,” in *The Penguin Book of South African Verse*, eds. Jack Cope and Uys Krige (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 240.

<sup>27</sup> Jane Kingsley-Smith, *Shakespeare's Drama of Exile* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 1.

freedom striding across the pages of its history. “The fulfilment of a People’s calling is a dual process, namely community formation and cultural creation out of the spiritual constitution of the People over against its actuality,” claimed Meyer of the Afrikaners.”<sup>28</sup> “Poet / let the people know / that dreams can become / reality”<sup>29</sup> wrote A.N.C. Kumalo (a pseudonym for Ronnie Kasrils) in exile. I discuss the ambiguities of language in South Africa in subsequent chapters.

Slaves were brought to South Africa, also exiles. The Greek word for “free,” *eleutheros*, meant “not a slave,”<sup>30</sup> with the negative attributes of slavery here dictating the meaning of freedom. “Freedom” as a word also undergoes many transformations in the South African context where the relationships between people were often defined in terms of ideals of freedom and rights. In the present, the word “slave” has been rescued across the Black Atlantic and the anguish of slavery has been given poignancy through a rich history or archive of cultural artefacts. We use words so carelessly too, yet there is a richness in the reaching back to representations of the complexity of lives lived whether in exile, freedom or slavery. To construct a safe haven, slaves carried their words with them and these words dot our linguistic diversity today. It is a heritage that informed the writing of many exiled poets: “out of a bent and slaving race / Proudly I can my fathers trace.”<sup>31</sup>

As early as 1330 the word “exile” had evolved to include compulsion by law as used by Roland: “to compel (a person) by a decree or enactment to leave his country; to banish, expatriate.”<sup>32</sup>

It was that kind of heat, the baby’s crying, the children are here, the plane is leaving me. I just turned and left everything where it was on the dusty ground, and went into the plane. I didn’t think I would find my case again. I couldn’t care less. That was one slap in the face that I got from the South African police. And I went into Zambia.<sup>33</sup>

Millions of South Africans were either given exit permits or went into exile or were banished to homelands. Black South Africans were forced to carry pass books so that their whereabouts could be traced at will, whim or random every minute of every day and consequently placed in prison for not carrying this document. People lived circumscribed lives which in effect tried to strip residents of citizenship and assign the black population to one of ten

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<sup>28</sup> T. Dunbar Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 163.

<sup>29</sup> A.N.C. Kumalo, “Red Our Colour,” in *Poets to the People*, ed. Barry Feinberg. Enlarged ed. (London: Heinemann, 1980), 58.

<sup>30</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 111.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Abraham, “Heritage,” in *The Return of the Amasi Bird*, eds. Tim Couzens and Essop Patel (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982), 100-101.

<sup>32</sup> Simpson, ed., *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>33</sup> Hilda Bernstein and Lauretta Ngcobo, “Interview,” in *The Rift*, 351.

designated homelands so that a person became for example, a Transkeian or Lebowan rather than a South African. Thousands were put under what was called house arrest. In effect apartheid created a system where “black people in South Africa came to be considered as “‘foreigners’– that is, migrant labour who belong elsewhere.”<sup>34</sup>

A possibly biblical metaphorical use of the word “exile” was recorded by Shakespeare in 1590 in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: “Thy wilfully themselves exile from light”<sup>35</sup> as “to banish or separate from one’s home, a pleasant or endeared place or association.”<sup>36</sup> Here we have an idea of home as a pleasant place, as well as the idea of home as representing the good and the free, as a source of light: “I make this point / Extinguishing the lights for Mdluli, / For the hundreds like Tiro and Biko / Shakes alive new lights more suddenly than you can write.”<sup>37</sup> Home and return from exile are common themes for exiled writers as well as postmodern/post-colonial theorists who examine the constructs that define our ideas of a home. The Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER)<sup>38</sup> at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg is producing important research on the meaning of home in South Africa which highlights the complexities and fluid ideas of home created by the legislature of colonial oppression and apartheid.

One obsolete definition of “exile” in the OED has the sense “to ravage, devastate,” to “bring to ruin.” This meaning was applied to the notion of bringing a country to ruin, so a country could be exiled, not only a person. “This land is wicked, evil they say / Not the land, only some of its ways.”<sup>39</sup> For the period covered by this thesis, such a meaning could be applied with some validity to South Africa itself as metaphor, or South Africa as a trope or allegory of exile: a country once exiled, ravaged, devastated by notions of belonging and un-belonging, ownership and dispossession, belonging nowhere, everywhere, in the world. Yet even as these words are written, they are changing: if the exiles from apartheid were recently the returned

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<sup>34</sup> Pillay, “Where Do You Belong? Natives, Foreigners and Apartheid South Africa,” 216.

<sup>35</sup> Simpson, ed., *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> John Matshikiza, “Lights,” in *Poets to the People*, ed. Barry Feinberg. Enlarged ed. (London: Heinemann, 1980), 140; Julia Hornberger, “Nocturnal Johannesburg,” in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, eds. Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008). Inter alia I refer the reader to Hornberger’s truly illuminating essay on light and electricity in Johannesburg, where she reminds us how light can tell a tale of apartheid too: the end of apartheid dimmed the police lights in the poverty stricken areas or townships of the city thus showing the dearth of electricity, while lights became brighter in the white compounds to allow surveillance of intruders.

<sup>38</sup> University of the Witwatersrand, “WISER : Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research,” accessed January 24, 2009, <http://wiserweb.wits.ac.za/index.htm>.

<sup>39</sup> Farooqi Mather, “My Country,” in *The Return of the Amasi Bird*, eds. Tim Couzens and Essop Patel (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982), 211.

heroes of a liberation struggle, the term is now used with mixed emotions, sometimes with anger or annoyance by another generation:

my love is like a road that has grown wings  
travellers drum their contemptible corrosions  
up the walls of my head  
that spits out the tasteless feet of nomads.<sup>40</sup>

And then there is a contemporary meaning of “exile,” simply to “get rid of”<sup>41</sup> – a performative act which cannot separate from concepts of freedom and truth, reconciliation, forgiveness, reparation. “I was aware that every contact they [the Security Branch] made with me was a deliberate, conscious action to destroy everything that was human in me.”<sup>42</sup>

### **Poetry, Memory and Exile**

I hope to give a feel for the intertextuality of the exilic experience Gilroy champions so as not to confine the poets of this thesis to the opposing, and often binary, tensions we inevitably encounter in critical theory. When limited by the constraints of our theories and our geography, key themes, narratives and concepts become confronting in themselves and could, as Gilroy warns, divide the consciousness of the subject. I am attracted to the idea of exploring a South African context of exile which could possibly reveal a nexus between poetry, exile-as-yet-undefined and community. Exiles are often informed by political agendas with concomitant cultural projects which tell us much about, for example, the nature of poetry itself. In spite of our academic acknowledgement of intertextuality, “poetry” (as a word, a name?) is still regarded as a specialist genre in many countries around the world, particularly by publishers, although poetry is not marginalized within the academy of literature departments. The academic narrative of the poetic genre started in England in the nineteenth-century. In South Africa the distinction arrived with the same academy. To read the poetry of South African exiles during the twentieth-century is to step outside the norm of the academy. We enter a society where a dynamic culture developed in parallel to (while also interacting with) the dominating structures of state-sanctioned modes of production. As a form of spoken literature or song, poetry was never on the margins of South African society.

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<sup>40</sup> Seithlamo Motsapi, “Enia,” in *The Lava of This Land: South African Poetry 1960-1966*, ed. Denis Hirson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 298.

<sup>41</sup> Simpson, ed., *Oxford English Dictionary*

<sup>42</sup> Hilda Bernstein and Wally Serote, “Interview,” in *The Rift*, 330.



I have confined my thesis to the twentieth-century, thus dating a phase in South African history, using Derrida's musings on the signification of dates<sup>43</sup> as my guide. I have also given a brief chronology on the etymology of the word "exile." However, the broad concept of exile as a recurring trope in poetry cannot, fortunately, be easily periodized: there are simply too many poetic representations of exile over place, space and time. By dating we reveal a confluence, a circularity, a constellation of histories. Many of these representations of exile are embedded in the thoroughly (until recently) periodized phase of Anglo-American modernist poetry, typified by the Eliot – Pound – Auden triumvirate. Exile is illusive and yet pervasive and particular. Poetic waves of exile sweep through our literatures. This lack of periodizing images of exile in poetry has much to do with definitions and interpretations of the concept of exile as we use the word through history.

Through notions of hybridity, the overarching label *post-colonial* foregrounds symbols of loss, displacement, anguish or resistance which the academy privileges by publication, university courses, writer's festivals and criticism, and gives voice to voices apparently on the periphery. It depends, of course, on where you place the centre. Historical consciousness, in a Marxist framework,<sup>44</sup> appears in a binary mode in post-colonial criticism, the impact and fall-out of colonization and the "empire writing back."<sup>45</sup> However, exilic poets do not depict themselves in terms of empire but rather as people intent on coping or adapting or responding, or indeed enjoying the multiple cultures to which they belong. The interpretation of Western modernism as internationalism<sup>46</sup> before World War II led to an idea of exile as the impetus for creation, the result of fusions of western experiences with western creations of otherness. After this war and the many other catastrophic wars and repressions of the twentieth-century, this positive, if even glamorous, perception of exile changed: the displacements, banishments, resettlements, executions, extermination of people appeared to demand new languages, both in creative and critical writing. However some exiles, such as Paul Celan or Dennis Brutus, were determined to use old languages to register an aesthetic transformation.

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<sup>43</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Shibboleth: For Paul Celan," in *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, eds. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

<sup>44</sup> Francis Njubi Nesbitt, "Review Article: Postcolonial Anxieties (Re)Presenting African Intellectuals," *African Affairs* 107, no. 427 (2008).

<sup>45</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>46</sup> A. Alvarez, *Beyond All This Fiddle: Essays 1955-1967* (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1968), 10.

Almost sixty years after the end of World War II, the effects of this transformation on poetry and its reception, in England in particular, are debatable. Some would argue that publishers are always reminding us

that the Eliot/Yeats/Auden devotion to form is the hallmark of British modernism and it constitutes a quality that must shape work that is being published . . . an orthodoxy . . . sameness. We will, of course, never hear this orthodoxy spoken of in terms of culture and race.<sup>47</sup>

This scenario is not replicated in South Africa, where culture and race have been the very determinants of literary debate. Where, to borrow a phrase from Chinua Achebe, does the power of narrative now lie?<sup>48</sup> I refer back to Couzens and Patel<sup>49</sup>: is there a narrative epic in the poetry of Black South Africans? “There is such a thing as absolute power over narrative. Those who secure this privilege for themselves can arrange stories about others pretty much where, and as, they like.”<sup>50</sup> So for example Achebe, Mphahlele or Soyinka, validly maintain that the ex-colonies have moved away from, perhaps beyond, the empire, transforming cultural production, while the empire remains in a stagnant state of repression although holding on to the power of the narrative-creating stories and placing these at the centre of that power. This dichotomy was reinforced by the 2003 war with Iraq, where a “coalition of the willing,” consisting primarily of two imperialist powers and one ex-colony, tells the same story and holds the power of this narrative, variously interpreted by others in broader contexts as clashes of barbarisms or fundamentalisms or modernities.<sup>51</sup>

The ease of mobility and communication of ideas, goods, popular culture and artefacts, have disturbed simple binaries of production and consumption. Literature becomes institutionalized as representations of marginality or “otherness.” This rescue effort is more often than not viewed as somewhat patronizing or irrelevant to those at the centre of the actual, lived experience of poverty, exile, or war, although we are now careful to write particularities and specificities, uncovering/discovering an exacting understanding of locality or representation, track or trace, and hence individual and communal lived experiences. The actual speaker, the troubadour, the poet, the migrant or the refugee or traveller, are not one and the same although their representations of this experience in poetry present as ethical or moral imperatives.

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<sup>47</sup> Kwame Dawes, “Black British Poetry: Some Considerations,” *Wasafiri* 18, no. 38 (Spring, 2003).

<sup>48</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Home and Exile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>49</sup> Tim Couzens and Essop Patel, eds., *The Return of the Amasi Bird: Black South African Poetry 1891-1981* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982).

<sup>50</sup> Achebe, *Home and Exile*, 24.

<sup>51</sup> Tariq Ali, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity* (London: Verso, 2002).

In her book *The Dialectics of Exile*, Sophia A. McClennen recounts a story of watching Ariel Dorfman, the Argentinian poet in exile in the United States, listening to a lecture given by Jean Baudrillard on Bosnia and observing the lack of acknowledgement by Baudrillard of the “pain” suffered by exiles:

Baudrillard could not account for the pain. His view of the world was unable to explain the reality of human suffering and the many ways that artists try to express such pain in their work. I knew then that I wanted to confront the playful way that exiles had been appropriated by theory and stripped of their tragic edge.<sup>52</sup>

The exile might need rescuing from literary theory but not from him/herself and comrades.

If we accept the hybrid nature of much exilic poetry, it seems presumptuous to seek commonality in representations. Poets might embrace their state of exile as a mechanism for survival which presents as difference and commonality with each other, not with the past, thus foregrounded by the present; what is different is that high modernist poetry assumed an elite audience, a rarefied academic or writer’s reception, while the writing of exile, exilic theory itself, assumes a wider public.

As a reader of, or listener to, Eliot’s poetry, Seamus Heaney draws on his own sense of social responsibility when he writes that Eliot “showed how poetic vocation entails the disciplining of a habit of expression until it becomes fundamental to the whole conduct of a life.”<sup>53</sup> Heaney seeks this out in the exiled Lithuanian poet Czeslaw Milosz:

His poetry concedes the instability of the subject and constantly reveals human consciousness as the site of contending discourses, yet he will not allow these recognitions to negate the immemorial command to hold one’s own, spiritually and morally.<sup>54</sup>

So the notion of exile here informs and implodes our idea of poetry, giving us the poetry of a popular or wider audience which is also embedded in a history of poetry, the lyric, political protest, song, slogans, chants, dirges, avant-garde, oral history, biography and so on. It is a history which includes the Favourite Poem Project in the States<sup>55</sup> and the Centre for Culture and Working Life in Durban, South Africa.<sup>56</sup>

This language of political change is as much a part of the period known as modernism as is the poetry of Kunene, Nortje and Brutus, Eliot, Spender, Auden, Celan, Senghor and Césaire.

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<sup>52</sup> Sophia A. McClennen, *The Dialectics of Exile: Nation, Time, Language, and Space in Hispanic Literatures* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2002), ix.

<sup>53</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber, 2002).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 413.

<sup>55</sup> Robert Pinsky, *Democracy, Culture and the Voice of Poetry* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>56</sup> Anthony O'Brien, *Against Normalization: Writing Radical Democracy in South Africa* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001).

Eliot, despite initially turning his back on a political purpose for poetry, renounced a single vision of poetry, insisting on variety and even concluding that there was a place for poetry in theatre, as a wider audience could be reached.<sup>57</sup> We cannot quibble with this. Auden and Spender, on the other hand, believed that poetry and politics were indivisible, as did the Dadaists whose startling political platform rejected the lot in a defiant anarchism. I argue that another facet of modernism was a more altruistic intent where poetry served the purpose of a political goal. Eliot, who often thought of himself as an exile, was in voluntary exile, a point of difference informing the concept of exile as applied to many South Africans. A large number of imprisoned activists turned to writing as a form of survival, becoming writers by choosing expression over extinction and by a conscious awareness of an audience or a community. Paradoxically, these expressions of modernism flourished in South Africa.

In 1942, Eliot had written his *Four Quartets* with World War II hanging like “death in the air.”<sup>58</sup> By the time Paul Celan writes “*Todesfuge*” ten years later in 1952, our image of high modernism has been transformed: “Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night / we drink you at midday Death is a master aus Deutschland . . .”<sup>59</sup> In his translation of Celan’s famous poem, Felstiner actually maintains some German towards the end and the effect is horrifying.

Memory is one way language deals with the past. The written word can only take this memory into the future, to a reader on an unknown journey in time. Later Celan stares into the image of the Wasteland: “Pour the Wasteland into your eye-sacks, / The call to sacrifice, the salt flood / Come with me to Breath / And beyond,”<sup>60</sup> as a call to a living death. The wasteland and the deathfuge become fused in my mind, reading both.

In 1956, four years after Celan wrote *Todesfuge*, Juan Gelman published his first collection in Buenos Aires, *Violin y otras cuestiones*.<sup>61</sup> Circulation of all Gelman’s work became difficult in the years of Argentina’s dirty wars. Here was a cosmopolitan society of Jewish refugees, fugitive Nazis and a home-grown dictator. The Argentinian poet in exile Marjorie Agosin wrote, “I am the disappeared woman, in a country grown dark / silenced by the wrathful

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<sup>57</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England* (London: Faber, 1933).

<sup>58</sup> ———, “Little Gidding,” in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969).

<sup>59</sup> Paul Celan, “Todesfuge,” in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, ed. John Felstiner (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 33.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Juan Gelman, *Violin Y Otras Cuestiones* (Barcelona: Editorial Seix Barral, 2006).

cubbyholes / of those with no memory,”<sup>62</sup> while Gelman, his family having become part of the *compañeros*, wrote in exile:

A couple of things have to be said  
That nobody reads it much  
That those nobodies are few and far between  
That everyone’s caught up in the world crisis ...  
The beautiful thing is knowing that you can sing cheep-cheep  
In the strangest circumstances.<sup>63</sup>

Gelman’s poems have a strikingly similarity to Cronin’s prison poems, both poets having been in exile or prison where writing served as a narrative, a construction of memory and being. We can find other examples of words written from deep suffering which display a generous humour, an altruistic gesture to a future audience. To be a writer in exile is then to be resolutely a person.

In an interview in 1995, the well-known poet Mongane Wally Serote said:

In one sense all South Africans were in a kind of exile. If you look at South Africa as a country, you will find that the whites pretended to be Europeans, and just by having committed such grievous crimes against humanity, they were in exile from humanity. Of course, there was also the literal exile that some of us were in.<sup>64</sup>

It is the possibility that people could be exiled from humanity that was to preoccupy writers such as Dennis Brutus, Es’kia Mphahlele, Arthur Nortje, Mongane Wally Serote, Nat Nakasa and many others. That this could be the meaning of humanism, that people could suffer and become victims due to political domination, was also a revelation to the young Percy Bysshe Shelley when he visited Ireland: “I had no conception of the depth of human misery until now.”<sup>65</sup>

In Nazi Germany, marching songs and hymns were co-opted by the regime as the valid forms of poetic expression.<sup>66</sup> This meant that the form of a poem, such as a sonnet, could be seen as a threat. Gansel and Kunze discuss the point that a poem or any work of art could take on a resistance unintended by the poet. Their conversation tries to account for the apparent silence of the German poet Peter Huchel during the Nazi period. In South Africa, where censorship was based on grand themes relating to communism, terrorism, group membership or perceived

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<sup>62</sup> Mary K. DeShazer, ed., *A Poetics of Resistance: Women Writing in El Salvador, South Africa, and the United States* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 36.

<sup>63</sup> Juan Gelman, “On Poetry,” in *Unthinkable Tenderness: Selected Poems Edited and Translated by Joan Lindgren; with a Foreword by Eduardo Galeano* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 120.

<sup>64</sup> Mongane Wally Serote and Rolf Solberg, “Interview. Mongane Wally Serote Interviewed by Rolf Solberg,” in *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid and Democracy, 1970-1995*, eds. Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 180-85.

<sup>65</sup> Kenneth Neill Cameron, *The Young Shelley: Genesis of a Radical* (New York, N.Y.: Collier Books, 1950), 180.

<sup>66</sup> Reiner Kunze, Mireille Gansel, and Ritchie Robertson, *In Time of Need: A Conversation About Poetry, Resistance and Exile*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Libris, 2006), 15.

immorality, this same consequence was always a possibility, due to the often unpredictable nature of censors' decisions and the frequent and increasingly draconian legislation. At the same time we can see in Arthur Nortje, who did not join the ANC but chose a personal exile, a poet whose writing embodies the notion of exile as convincingly as the more politically involved writers Es'kia Mphahlele or Dennis Brutus. The question of courage in the face of evil becomes an intensely and highly personal one. Adorno's statement on the role of poetry after the Holocaust had a long and specific gestation. Germans had a reverence for their national poets, some of whom were included in Goebbel's *Deutsches Hausbuch*.<sup>67</sup> Writers have little control over readership. However, Kunze subscribes to the view that "on the level of poetry, national animosities are unthinkable,"<sup>68</sup> that the purpose of poetry is to "save what is human in the human being, to preserve it from all estrangement and destruction."<sup>69</sup> In other words those who choose to read any poetry, regardless of their or the poets' origins, have crossed beyond borders of belonging only to a nation or a state. For the poetry reader, identity hinges more on a polis of poets than a polis of national solidarity. Gansel reflects on Kertesz for whom "happiness is to remain always creative, to preserve a sense of deeper grief and greatest joy and not to look past the faces of others, but to meet their gaze."<sup>70</sup> Danticat asks a question that has informed this thesis: "How do writers and readers find each other under such dangerous circumstances?"<sup>71</sup> In South Africa this was overcome by sloganistic, almost ritualistic performative poetry; however, the poets considered in this study were also readers, not only of their forbearers, but also of each other. For Danticat the courage to "create dangerously" has its hopeful intent in the unity of writers who people will read despite the personal risk, a "loyal citizen of the country of his readers."<sup>72</sup>

Robertson traces the practice of exiling German poets from the many duchies and principalities which made up what we call Germany today. For example, in the nineteenth-century, Georg Buchner's membership of the Society for the Rights of Man and his pamphlet distribution led to his forced exile. This sounds remarkably like twentieth-century South Africa where Jeremy Cronin was arrested for distributing pamphlets with the consequence of spending

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>71</sup> Edwidge Danticat, *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*, The Toni Morrison Lecture Series (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), 10.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 15.

seven years in prison.<sup>73</sup> Buchner was followed by Heine, Marx, Brecht and Mann, Adorno and Benjamin. In 1933 Marxist writing was banned in Germany; in 1960s South Africa any literature perceived to promote Marxist or Communist thought was also banned.

Many of Germany's exilic poets took up residence in both North and South America, while the poets exiled from the Southern Cone fled to North America and Europe. South African exiles moved to Africa, Europe, and North and South America, where the synergies of cosmopolitanism were to affect their attitudes to exile, South Africa and to their writing. There was a German exile community in South Africa too, as well as a Jewish community of exiles and immigrants spanning the first half of the twentieth-century.

The nature of poetry and its public role is always particular to time, place, space and function, as well as the agents which produce the poetic field. Similarly the poetry of exiles from different countries reflects specific exilic experiences. Gansel and Kunze point out that 1960s Czechoslovakia actually had "five hundred poetry theatres."<sup>74</sup> Danticat relates that Jeremie in Haiti has been called "the city of poets."<sup>75</sup> Borrowing her title from Camus,<sup>76</sup> Danticat reveals the horror faced by Haitian poets who fled into exile. Taking the biblical expulsion as the original exile, Danticat explains that "we, the storytellers of the world, ought to be more grateful than most that banishment, rather than execution, was chosen for Adam and Eve, for had they been executed, there would never have been another story told, no stories to pass on."<sup>77</sup> The censorship, bannings and oppression in Haiti bear a strong resemblance to Nazi Germany. D'Addario reads the Adam and Eve expulsion as "a tale of the fall into language,"<sup>78</sup> the allegorical meaning of which troubled Milton, another exile.

The Southern Cone poetry of Argentina, Chile and Uruguay has been discussed specifically in relation to exile.<sup>79</sup> The military dictatorships of the 1970s led to a massive exile of poets and singers from the region, resulting in far-reaching implications for notions of democracy and culture. Poets of this period depict exile as a state of ambivalence between a concern for the future and a dissonant nostalgia for an often inglorious past, at the same time

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<sup>73</sup> Barbara Harlow and Jeremy Cronin, "A Chapter in South African Verse: Interview with Jeremy Cronin," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 21 (2001).

<sup>74</sup> Kunze, Gansel, and Robertson, *'In Time of Need': A Conversation About Poetry, Resistance and Exile* 19.

<sup>75</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*, 1.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>78</sup> Christopher D'Addario, *Exile and Journey in Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5.

<sup>79</sup> María Rosa Olivera-Williams, "Poesía Del Exilio: El Cono Sur," *Revista Hispánica Moderna* 41, no. 2 (December, 1988).

using humour to come to grips with often terrifying losses. Olivera-Williams discusses the exilic poetry of the Uruguayan, Enrique Fierro, the Chilean, Gonzalo Millan and the Argentinian, Juan Gelman. She argues convincingly that exile infuses their poetry with a unity of traditions which included the French symbolists (the latter also influenced Breyten Breytenbach's poetry) and Walt Whitman. In different ways, these poets seek a unity of purpose and thought in their work as a response to exile. The political activism of poets such as Gelman and Mario Benedetti contributed to their current iconic status as poets in their respective cultures. Gelman uses the language of popular song traditions to evoke the pain and loss he experienced through exile, seeking an intimacy and closeness to his home that was cast aside by exile. There is no bitterness in exile. Benedetti, another Uruguayan exilic poet, wryly calls life "a mess" as he tries to fathom why "I don't know what the wind of exile is saying."<sup>80</sup>

You learn  
And use what you learn  
To slowly grow wise  
To know that in the end this is what the world's about  
Nostalgia at the best of times  
Something lost at the worst of times  
And always, always  
A mess<sup>81</sup>

Already, if we listen to these voices, we hear different songs of exile informed by the cultural, geographical and bio-political significations and singularity of each poet's experience. Yet intimations of loss haunt the exile and were recalled at a conference in 2004 when South African exiles and émigrés came together to investigate notions of home and exile in relation to personal experience.<sup>82</sup> Gualtieri observed that a dialectic of exile and freedom appeared at this gathering, which was addressed by once exiled South African poet Lindiwe Mabuza whose experience of exile we will discover later in this thesis. Here exile as the denial of rights was contrasted to the freedom to create a new literary imaginary located firmly outside the physical constraints of apartheid. However, on a personal level, the after-shocks and reverberations of exile and apartheid were still starkly apparent. What to do with freedom, from and after exile, haunts our exilic poets after their return to South Africa.

The long and rich history of exiles from and within Africa constitutes the work of many theorists, from Paul Gilroy to Tejumola Olaniyan, Ato Quayson and Achille Mbembe. The idea of exile as being possible both inside and outside a country has many iterations: in Germany,

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<sup>80</sup> Mario Benedetti, "The Wind of Exile," in *Little Stones at My Window* (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 2003).

<sup>81</sup> ———, "Curriculum," in *Little Stones at My Window* (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 2003).

<sup>82</sup> Claudia Gualtieri, "The Letters Home Festival. Exiles and Emigres: South Africans Writing Abroad, Cambridge, Great Britain, 5-6 March 2004," *Il Tolomeo* 8 (2004).



“inner emigration” referred to those Germans who withheld support for the Nazis but kept silent during the period; in the Southern Cone, the *isilios* were those who experienced banishment or house arrest within their countries, as opposed to the *exilios* who were exiled abroad. In Haiti the *diaspora* described the many Haitians who left voluntarily to live away from the Duvalier regimes, while *peyi andeyo*, “the outside country,”<sup>83</sup> referred to the countryside surrounding Port au Prince. I agree with LaCapra that “the problem of reading or interpretation cannot be posed in abstraction from significant historical contexts in which texts and artefacts are produced, received, and appropriated.”<sup>84</sup>

### **No Address: theories of exile**

Edward Said was continually reconstructing both his past and the past of Palestine to give voice to the Palestinian people. Said could be described as *the* exile theorist, and many works have examined the apparent contradictions between his political stance and his literary theories, the latter often read as representing the “universal” or grand themes of a limited English canon. Ashcroft and Ahluwalia<sup>85</sup> present a persuasive case for Said as the true intellectual exile who, while constructing a personal identity based around the Palestinian cause, has allowed the literary influences of his childhood and early adulthood to remain part of his intellectual make-up.

A few of Said’s ideas could be useful here: Said’s pursuit of the theme of exile in the canon is from his interest in the creation of the English canon by people born outside of England. Certainly in post-apartheid South Africa, an “English” canon in South Africa was very quickly replaced by a “South African” canon aimed at the outside English-speaking world, particularly in fiction. In Saidian terms, this South African canon reflects “the contrapuntal,”<sup>86</sup> without privileging a dominant text. We have seen that in South Africa, political repression played an immediate role in the transformation of both language and literature. Said saw resistance as a liberating force that rewrites a culture in its own transformed image. He argued for “resistance as

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<sup>83</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*, 51.

<sup>84</sup> Dominick LaCapra, ed., *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 3.

<sup>85</sup> Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia, *Edward Said: The Paradox of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>86</sup> Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said, *Parallels and Paradoxes: Explorations in Music and Society* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003).

an alternative way of conceiving human history”<sup>87</sup> so that we can give voice to a moral alternative.

For Said the space between the real and the imagined is grounded in the concept of “worldliness,”<sup>88</sup> which allows one to be attuned to all influences in one’s surrounding culture, akin to embracing Ndebele’s celebration of the ordinary and the everyday. A Saidian exilic identity is constructed around the space between cultures; with no one culture creating the formative influence. This cross-border place enables and fosters the emergence of new voices. It is this arena that South African writers are now trying to occupy; a space, arguably, that exilic writers inhabit until the moment of transformation when their voices become part of mainstream cultural practice in a transformed society. We can see the difficulty of this process expressed in the poetry of Mongane Wally Serote, who continually asks himself:

why us...  
they taught us to sing and define our own ecstasy  
and confused us about what was normal  
and what was not”<sup>89</sup> ...”  
would there be peace then  
if also there was no identity  
and we left if we wished to  
and had no address?<sup>90</sup>

This agony is addressed to the present and the past, the haunted past of someone who had to endure the incursions of assassins across the border to his safe haven in exile in Botswana. How do you now just settle down as if the struggle for normality had not happened? And if the normal is forgetting, is this normal? What if there is no identity? Or identity is not part of the question? These lines evoke the image of a nomad who belongs to a past that continually needs resurrecting for the notion of home to become real.

In the virtual world, you create any identity or no identity which might or might not be real in the imaginary or in the actuality of place, space or time. This is not what Serote desires: the world of the exile is always real, grounded in history, but with almost always a possibility of virtually beginning again. The desire for a sense of what it means to find a community hides behind exilic life. This process could be much simpler in the information technology age were the same restrictions of censorship or repression not widespread. Many political, social media or cultural commentators broadly see community everywhere in internet culture, belonging made

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<sup>87</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 260.

<sup>88</sup> Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta Books, 2001), 301.

<sup>89</sup> Mongane Wally Serote, *History Is the Home Address* (Roggebaai, South Africa: Kwela Books and Snailpress, 2004), 52.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

possible by lack of boundaries and optical fibre. This world even makes it possible to experience ubuntu from wherever you are, from your solitary workstation as you enter a world with words bypassing those borders designed to keep people out. You might, for example, experience ubuntu as an operating system developed by a South African and drawing on the notion of communal sharing by offering the world a free computer product to stand as a contrast to Microsoft and Apple. Can we redefine the emerging South African canons from the company ubuntu's name (Canonical) and its stated intention that "it is not coercive. Unlike holding a monopoly, becoming the canonical location for something implies a similar sort of success - but never one that cannot be undone, and never one that is exclusive."<sup>91</sup> Thus these emerging canons are not coercive or exclusive. This ubuntu is fast becoming a standard platform for many people across the world, a revolution of sorts not anticipated in the late nineteenth-century when I.W.W. Citashe wrote: "Your rights are going! / So pick up your pen, / Load it, load it with ink."<sup>92</sup> Until the mid to late 1970s only voices, typewriters, pens and paper and musical instruments were available to South African writers under apartheid and these modes of production became creative tools used to assert a belonging to the domain of humanness in all its multiple guises.

What does it mean to belong to a country? We are defined within geographic and political borders. Stuart Hall reminds us that as globalization, primarily a capitalist concept, pushes barriers apart, "lots of people out there... have heard the good news about cultural diversity and they are busy slamming doors, drawing curtains" in a move towards "ethnic and national closure."<sup>93</sup> In most European and English-speaking Western societies, this reaction has been aggravated by post-September 11 discourse which has driven this closure, this "defensive movement against openness and diversity." Is it an "idea of culture,"<sup>94</sup> that defines a sense of belonging or identity? Or an idea of childhood, the becoming of self lived in a space-absorbed and a space-created? How do you define being a citizen of this childhood space when hegemonic powers decide you are not in fact or in story, this citizen you think you are?

Much recent European political and literary theory centres on identify formation, the result of increased ethnicism, shifting boundaries and rewriting pasts. When Germany was unified many artists and writers once more reassessed Germany's past (for example Gunter Grass and Anselm Kiefer). We have seen the break-up of Eastern Europe into ethnic groups which led to changes in relationships with the rest of Europe and with America. The Palestinian/Israeli

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<sup>91</sup> Ubuntu and Canonical, "Ubuntu," <http://www.ubuntu.com/>.

<sup>92</sup> I.W.W. Citashe, "Your Cattle Are Gone: 1892-1949," in *The Return of the Amasi Bird*, eds. Tim Couzens and Essop Patel (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982), 15.

<sup>93</sup> Stuart Hall, "Reinventing Britain: A Forum," *Wasafiri* 14, no. 29 (Spring, 1999), 43.

<sup>94</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*. (Blackwell: 2000).

crisis continues. The question of an Arab, Muslim or Islamic identity dominates many people's lives as well as the media, commentators and scholars, just as it did for Edward Said during his lifetime. Identity as a trope generates an extraordinary amount of literature.

Gilroy rejects this preoccupation with identity as necessarily nationalistic, and hence restrictive in understanding the poetics of the black diaspora. However, he does not reject the ongoing effect of a colonial legacy. Discourses of independence, interdependence and identity have dominated politics in Africa and black diaspora scholarship and figured in South African politics for most of its colonial and post-colonial period. Appiah exhorts writers not to deny the specific and particular effects of colonialism on their own creative endeavours in order to privilege the unitary approach of an African metaphysics.<sup>95</sup> The attempt to create unity is a matter that still haunts South Africa grappling with the recent divisions within the ANC as well as the very local polyglot African communities and alliances still converging and diverging across the African continent, and still changing the physical and cultural landscape within South Africa. Ruminating on his return from exile, John Matshikiza concludes that "South Africa, as they say, is finally becoming African."<sup>96</sup>

Négritude poets such as Senghor struggled with their political relationships in a different way to South African exilic poets. Colonial domination might have produced what Gilroy calls a "politics of fulfilment"<sup>97</sup> among the black diaspora; nevertheless, there have been very different developments in the art and culture of the former colonies. Soyinka comments, for example, that du Bois' early seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk*<sup>98</sup> shows little interest in Africa per se, while the Négritude poets embraced the past as "armoury in the heated course of validating their present."<sup>99</sup> Africa, symbolised by a musical instrument, the Sasso-Bala, visited Senghor in Paris. Soyinka recounts the appearance of the Sasso-Bala at a celebration in Paris for Senghor's ninetieth birthday. Symbolic of the defence of part of Guinea in 1230, the Sasso-Bala had never left Guinea or Africa. With the assistance of UNESCO and the Government of the Republic of Guinea, the instrument, which inspired the rhythm of Senghor's poetry, was brought to the aged Senghor in Paris. Here a precious symbol of African independence travels confidently out of Africa in acknowledgement of the right of Senghor to call himself both "Black" and "French." Soyinka saw the Sasso-Bala as a "metaphor for literature itself — and especially for literature

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<sup>95</sup> Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, 130.

<sup>96</sup> Matshikiza, "Instant City," 238.

<sup>97</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 37. (Gilroy notes he adapted this concept from Seyla Benhabib).

<sup>98</sup> W.E.B. du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1996).

<sup>99</sup> Wole Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 132.

that is the product of a crisis.”<sup>100</sup> He sees a role for literature in presenting these symbolic moments of forgiveness. Expanding the metaphor, he concluded:

The Sasso-Bala becomes an unsolicited metaphor for the new intolerable burden of memory, a Muse for the poetry of identity and that elusive “leaven” in the dough of humanity – forgiveness, the remission of wrongs, and recurring of lost innocence.

South Africa has turned Mandela into its Sasso-Bala but that legend is now being questioned within South Africa itself.

This creation of “new neighbours” or trusted encounters as “poetry past encounters present, that which can never come back,”<sup>101</sup> places the South African exilic condition firmly within Naficy’s idea of defamiliarization<sup>102</sup>: literature creating new encounters. Part of our response to the present is to articulate aspects of the past. This position needs to be *acknowledged* as a response to the present: to examine how the representations of the apartheid years, as articulated in poetry and song might move away from stereotype, the oppositional.

Pechey writes that the “post-apartheid discourse...is nothing less than the (re)composition of the whole social text of South Africa.”<sup>103</sup> Such a long and arduous task is surely the responsibility of any society which takes its history, its freedom, seriously. Critical reassessments will haunt younger generations but with their own discourse, derived from current day South Africa. If, as Wilson maintains, “the most significant site of otherness for the new South Africa has not been other nations, it has been itself ...where pride is only to be found in resistance,”<sup>104</sup> then it is important to place that pride in the present by examining the poems of resistance that dominated the apartheid years. And we should grasp the precious freedom fought for, and found, by recalling and naming a poem or poet as a bearer or recorder of resistance. The question then is surely: What do we do with our response?

The fact that our current ethos appears unwilling to resolve the political crises that give rise to exilic conditions tends to negate the privileging of the particular in the postmodern world. Naficy in his provocative essay *framing exile: from homeland to homepage*<sup>105</sup> concurs, arguing that the apparent virtual world of the internet in fact masks the structures of specific politics which produce the means of virtual representations. Naficy is appreciative of Derrida’s plea for a

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 191-192 .

<sup>101</sup> Derrida, *Acts of Literature* , 394.

<sup>102</sup> Hamid Naficy, “framing exile: from homeland to homepage [sic],” in *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media and the Politics of Place*, ed. Hamid Naficy (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>103</sup> Graham Pechey, “Introduction,” in *South African Literature and Culture: Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 4.

<sup>104</sup> Richard A. Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 16-17.

<sup>105</sup> Naficy, “framing exile: from homeland to homepage,” 1-13.

location of memory in the extremes of suffering where exilic culture and theories of representation are continually challenged or exiled or recalled. Sometimes this suffering is easily forgotten because of a ready access to a barrage of images and stories from reporters and NGOs. The medium is the message and the message dies. The exception to this, I would argue, is in poetry and the writing or art of those in exile. In the twenty-first century these cultural artefacts are infinitely more accessible to those who can attend gatherings or galleries or through freedom of access or sufficient resources and education. Naficy is concerned that the concept of exile becomes too fluid in cyberspace and that the globalized world “may drain everyday life of its historical memory,”<sup>106</sup> yet finds seductive the possibilities of seeking to represent exile in the new multiple media by disturbing a “sense of ontology”; in other words, he is interested in how the internet disturbs our ability to define identity in terms of the nation-state. These speculations are beyond the scope of this thesis except to note that the news media in one form or another worked and continues to work with the nation-state to define issues of nationhood subsequently explored or exposed by other forms of representation, including the possibility of anarchic publishing on the internet. Naficy’s contention that “exile appears to have become a postmodern condition”<sup>107</sup> is given support by dominant western discourses of the “other” or “difference” appearing as platforms in western government elections. But exile was always also a modern condition and it is not surprising that there are theorists who now propose that the “postmodern” is, in fact, late modernism.<sup>108</sup> I will discuss this further in later chapters. Our embrace of labels can do the exilic writer a disservice despite the prominence these writers might be given due to these very labels. The exilic writer disturbs our (sense of) ontology.

Exile tends to be interpreted as representing a dialectical relationship between state and subject or between north/south or east/west, even though the *idea* of exile cannot be tied to one geographic entity despite the possibility that that entity, in the form of state power, might exercise a form of oppression. South/North distinctions become subjective depending on interpretation of histories. Of course this concept of difference dominates colonial history and indeed Enlightenment philosophers such as Hegel were wary of the otherness of Africa. “There is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this kind of character,” Hegel blithely and assuredly asserted, finding the African lacking “universality.”<sup>109</sup> Gilroy and others have shown us how the incorporation of Hegel’s view of Africa on the Enlightenment project of colonialism led to much destruction. It seems we always create a home, a space, for difference. Since 9/11

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., viii.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>108</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, ed., *Altermodern* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009).

<sup>109</sup> Georg W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History* (New York: The Colonial Press, 1899), 93.

the idea of the “other” reached a new crisis, the definition of an “other” being very much dependent on hegemony. In South Africa a defining moment in attempting to reconcile inconceivably opposing world views was the formation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and discussions about retribution or reparation. The exile easily slips between spaces and is not an “other” but someone who is owed or owes some retribution or reparation, a retribution for fragmented histories whose defined space is not yet known, is in the process of transformation, or mapping. The traveller, the exile, might find this space in the home of an/other, a retribution which the other often rejects, hence the growing support for the politics of right-wing politicians who campaign on an anti-migrant stance.

Naficy sees this as a crisis, a crisis of “the empirical and metaphorical house, home and homeland,”<sup>110</sup> where the conventional symbols which served the modernist world so well, and which include the idea of home as a refuge, are now in disarray. In South Africa the concept of homeland was in crisis throughout its period of modernity, being a place of enforced confinement used by governments to convey a benevolent returning of a person to their linguistic kin, a placing of like with like, without the “other.” The term homeland negated itself.

Underground and above ground, South African writers continually grappled with dialectical responsibilities towards their writing, themselves, and their political beliefs. Critics and writers such as André Brink,<sup>111</sup> although somewhat suspicious of broad, defining unifying themes such as the artists’ responsibility to society or the relationship between politics and literature, questioned how apartheid, an ideology, a whole, an embracing dictum, legislatively complete, could contain the language of the individual writer when no fragmentation of the apartheid dictum seemed possible in society. Adorno<sup>112</sup> argued that the dialectic which constantly challenged the relationship between the artist and society, politics and literature, was a necessary one for the state to maintain control over literature. In 1987, during the South African State of Emergency, Brink<sup>113</sup> examined the role of literature under apartheid and concluded that language had to find forms of utterance other than that of violence and opposition. Brink expressed the desire to transform South Africa’s literary culture and prefigured the official ANC view<sup>114</sup> on cultural transformation a few years later.

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<sup>110</sup> Naficy, “framing exile: from homeland to homepage,” 6.

<sup>111</sup> André Brink, *Reinventing a Continent: Writing and Politics in South Africa 1982-1985* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1996).

<sup>112</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O'Connor (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

<sup>113</sup> Brink, *Reinventing a Continent: Writing and Politics in South Africa 1982-1985*, 51.

<sup>114</sup> Albie Sachs, “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom: Culture and the ANC Constitutional Guidelines,” *TDR* 35, no. 1 (1991): 187-93.

The heavy weight of legislation and state defined the space of many realities, discourses of power and the rule of law that shaped the words and the language used to both create and represent the exilic condition. We now “interrogate” an idea, a concept. André Brink<sup>115</sup> “interrogated” the role of language in South African literature, language as an interrogation of the silence imposed by apartheid on opposition. A profound disturbance of opposition ontology disrupted the language of oppressor and oppressed so that language found a home where the dead usually lie, underground. Mphahlele would reject this analysis totally. South African writers, he maintained, were struggling to maintain their live-likeness, their above-ground hammering away against a hegemony that failed to represent the normal definition of Enlightenment humanism sought by these writers.

Wherever we look in history we find a symbiosis between poetry and politics. Each conflict produces its own literature and hence its own literary symbols. In her discussion of the Israeli writer David Grossman, Jacqueline Rose observes that his writing seems to posit that “the role of writing . . . is to push you right through what should be the impassable boundaries of the mind.”<sup>116</sup> E’skia Mphahlele would agree that it was not the literary culture of his contemporaries but the resistance of white South Africans to humanism that pushed his writing beyond the bounds of debate about acceptable forms of literature or literary criticism. The act of writing becomes an act of altruism, however negative or angry the tone: that, in spite of resistance to acts of altruism, the poets considered in this thesis resisted this “other,” resistance through the political act of continued literary creation. Where Krog calls for an end to barriers of misunderstanding, Rose warns of the complexity of such a task in her analysis of the relationship of literature to politics:

But in a conflictual reality of contested boundaries between people, where distance is so intensely charged, to make such a crossing could also be described as a political longing, whose meaning resides precisely in the revulsion it at once encounters and must try, against the odds, to shed.<sup>117</sup>

In subsequent chapters I will suggest that when the will to speak or write disappears so does the hope to keep on creating, to leave more traces, and so, in the case of the poet Arthur Nortje, life itself became the act of death.

Broe and Ingram investigate the ways in which exile has been constructed from a gendered viewpoint with value often placed on an assumed male perspective. In women’s

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<sup>115</sup> André Brink, “Interrogating Silence: New Possibilities Faced by South African Literature,” in *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid and Democracy, 1970-1995*, eds. Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 14-28.

<sup>116</sup> Rose, *The Last Resistance*, 11.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.



writing and women's writing about exile, they discover a shifting perspective of exile as decentred or centring and moving, fluid and complex. I have given much thought to Ingram's introduction to women's writing in exile, particularly her point that those who equate or interpret the creative writing of exiles and dissidents in European or the West find value in concepts that are "hierarchical and patriarchal [sic], militarist and imperialist."<sup>118</sup> In these terms, they find women writing in exile to be the aliens, the outsiders. I am specifically aware that I use a possibly gendered term "courage" to describe some exilic writing. I use the word deliberately in the context of taking risks and giving voice. I construe exile as an ambiguous metaphor which constructs a contested state of being dependent on the privileging practiced by the critic or historian. The seductive possibilities of Broe and Ingram's position are the deracialization of exile and also its denationalization. Geography becomes less important and the definition of home more complex. It is also worth noting that, according to a recent review of the book *Half the Sky*, more than ten times the number of slaves traded in the 1780s are now being sold illegally around the world, and this number pertains only to the trafficking of women.<sup>119</sup> It is true that women members of the ANC often had to struggle in a courageous way themselves against a predominantly patriarchal structure that came late to the inclusion of women in the organization (women were only allowed to join the ANC in 1943).<sup>120</sup> I discuss the effect of exile on women and their writing in later chapters. I also include a discussion of Afrikaans women poets who were often on the fringes of a very dominant, masculine, violent society writing at times outside the dominating hierarchies of their time. However I apply the word "courage" not as a gendered term denoting physical strength but rather as a psychological state which can be found in anyone, anywhere at anytime and sometimes unexpectedly, an ability perhaps to meet the gaze of, or to face, suppressive or abusive powerbrokers. Many of the writers discussed in Broe and Ingram's book displayed this courage, as did the poets discussed in this thesis. Broe and Ingram contend that women often find a home in writing, a sentiment they acknowledge is echoed by exiled writers across time, place, gender and race. However, they argue "male exiles / expatriates...are almost always at home in their Word, and the countries they leave are *their* countries /

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<sup>118</sup> Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram, eds., *Women's Writing in Exile* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 3.

<sup>119</sup> Ed Pilkington, "Half the Sky: How the Trafficking of Women Today Is on a Par with Genocide," accessed September 15, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/aug/19/women-slavery-half-the-sky>.

<sup>120</sup> African National Congress Women's League, "Short History," African National Congress, accessed May 23, 2007, <http://www.anc.org.za/wl/show.php?include=../docs/misc/2010/misc0706.html>.

*patriae*.<sup>121</sup> I have not found this certainty in the male South African poets discussed in this thesis though I agree absolutely that the demands on women in oppressive societies lead to different perceptions and strategies of coping, constructing, representing and living in, these worlds. Certainly in terms of the high incidence of rape in South Africa and at times, Zuma's masculine bravado in the face of AIDS, the long history of women's oppression in South Africa is far from over.

I would agree with Benstock that the use of the term "exile" through the European and American modernist period incorporates both the exile and the expatriate<sup>122</sup> and that the internalization of these states would have differed between genders. I explore some of these differences in chapter 6. Benstock reveals that the OED definitions of "exile" and "expatriation" are "etymologically conjoined to the patriarchal, incorporating the father/ruler whose law effects and enforces *expatriating*."<sup>123</sup> It is interesting to note that while the Afrikaans rulers of South Africa during apartheid referred to the fatherland, the ANC always spoke of the motherland or mother Africa. Women were either ascribed the role of saviour or were assumed to be the symbolic bearers of the notion of home. For Benstock, paraphrasing Sandra Gilbert, *matria* "is that which is repressed, rejected, colonized, written over, subjected, erased, silenced."<sup>124</sup> With the qualification that I am not examining gendered relations within South African political movements in exile, I have taken cognizance of this trope in my discussion of poems which evoke the idea of mother Africa. I discuss the poetry of Christine Douts Qunta who dedicated her collection *Hoyi Na! Azania* foremost to her "mother and grandmother, women of steel," and then to her partner and "the fighting people of our country."<sup>125</sup>

In 1963 the just-banned South African Dennis Brutus sent his poems out of South Africa for publication by Mbari Publications in Nigeria: "over the sirens, knuckles, boots; / my sounds begin again."<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Broe and Ingram, eds., *Women's Writing in Exile*, 14. In Latin *patria* was the word for native land; in Spanish, the word *patria* is the word for country.

<sup>122</sup> Shari Benstock, "Expatriate Modernism: Writing at the Cultural Rim," in *Women's Writing in Exile*, eds. Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 20.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> Christine Douts Qunta, *Hoyi Na! Azania: Poems of an African Struggle*. (Sydney: Marimba Enterprises, 1979), Dedication.

<sup>126</sup> Dennis Brutus, "The Sounds Begin Again," in *A Simple Lust: Selected Poems Including Sirens Knuckles Boots, Letters to Martha, Poems from Algiers, Thoughts Abroad* (London: Heinemann, 1973), 19.

Achebe described the sudden publication of Nigerian literature, the “new literature” as sharing

one common thread...: the thread of a shared humanity linking the author to the world of his creation; a sense that even in the most tempting moments of grave disappointment with this world, the author remains painfully aware that he is of the same flesh and blood, the same humanity as its human inhabitants.<sup>127</sup>

Bruno Bettelheim, a psychoanalyst imprisoned in Dachau and Buchenwald, “was to educate himself into realizing how much of what went on around him expressed what went on inside himself.”<sup>128</sup>

Language, here transformed by exile, is clamouring to be heard: “my sounds begin again.” Words become shrill like “the sheet / of the twisted tin shack / grating in the wind / in a shrill sad protest.”<sup>129</sup> This voice of the sheet of twisted tin shack (Brutus’s voice) becomes a representation of the struggle against global poverty or displaced people in Palestine for example, while in 1963 it represented apartheid in South Africa; shanty towns being razed, rebuilt, moved, resettled, abandoned and created as home, prison or flight from the bulldozer’s path. We can try to “take Breath and beyond” to Little Giddings where “dust inbreathed was a house,”<sup>130</sup> and place the exilic experience in the conscience and consciousness of post-war poetic reception by relocating culturally specific images away from the dominant centre of modernism. However, we should note the almost symbolic use of language in Brutus’s words, its metonymic quality.

Literature has always been central to the struggle for a just society. The poetry of the South African canon which includes Mafika Gwala, Dennis Brutus, Jeremy Cronin, Breyten Breytenbach, Rebecca Matlou, Arthur Nortje and hundreds of others, confronted directly the problems of writing, exile and apartheid; some, as in the case of Mazisi Kunene by writing in Zulu, and others like Breyten Breytenbach, in the Afrikaans language, which was also the language of the oppressors. Writing, heavily censored in apartheid South Africa, was an essential part of transforming South Africa but many of its poets would remain largely unknown to most South Africans during the apartheid years.

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<sup>127</sup> Achebe, *Home and Exile*, 49.

<sup>128</sup> Alvarez, *Beyond All This Fiddle: Essays 1955-1967*, 39-40.

<sup>129</sup> Dennis Brutus, “I Am the Tree,” in *A Simple Lust: Selected Poems Including Sirens Knuckles Boots, Letters to Martha, Poems from Algiers, Thoughts Abroad* (London: Heinemann, 1973), 106.

<sup>130</sup> Eliot, “Little Gidding,” 192.

As Ashis Nandy<sup>131</sup> has shown, only by looking at cultural specificity can we progress the literary debate beyond the standard dialectic. The rich tradition of poetry and exilic writing, song and music in South Africa is accompanied by cartoons and journalism from the inception of black newspapers which generated a very large readership. There is still scope for extensive detailed studies of these aspects of culture in South Africa, especially as more and more archival material becomes accessible. Exilic poetry was published or spoken or sung and has often been documented or appraised in some way by academic studies but also, most importantly, within the ANC. The formation of cultural policy by an exiled ANC had an influence on literary studies and the promotion of creativity as did official attempts to silence this writing or speaking. Film was an important medium in South African literary culture, and many documentaries have presented apartheid South Africa or South African life under apartheid to a broad audience. Once more, the absence through banning of some films or images had an impact on developments in this area.

Reporting on a 1988 Congress of South African Writers (henceforth COSAW) workshop, Schreiner commented:

One person raised the point that song and dance had been co-opted by the regime and their puppet allies, in a manner that is best encapsulated by the colonial cliché ‘well, all blacks have rhythm.’ This was the way the government used mine dancing and musicals to promote its image of the ‘happy black in South Africa’. However, it was argued that this should not mean that music and dance should be shunned.<sup>132</sup>

South African poetry and song evolves from a tradition in which both the spoken and written word have equal weight against a state apparatus that tried to repress both.

Clichés about the role of song and music in black culture were a common part of racist discourse, and Paul Gilroy and others have dedicated their work to examining what such assumptions really mean by focusing on the representations of freedom and resistance in the work of many black diaspora musicians and song-writers. In 1932, Eliot wrote that: “Poetry begins, I dare say, with a savage beating a drum in a jungle, and it retains that essential of percussion and rhythm.”<sup>133</sup> This image is not endearing or enduring although I have taken out of context Eliot’s central focus on the importance of rhythm and music in words. In fact the cliché about black rhythm and black performance poetry is highly contested: “The position of the black poet in Britain has become inextricably linked to notions of ‘performance poetry.’”<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

<sup>132</sup> Barbie Schreiner, “Report on Congress of South African Writers Workshop,” *Staffrider* 7, no. 1 (1988), 85.

<sup>133</sup> Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England*, 155.

<sup>134</sup> Dawes, “Black British Poetry: Some Considerations,” 44.

Samuel Mqhayi, the greatest proponent of Xhosa poetry in South Africa, much of which was performative in nature, died in 1945. His voice comes to us as a spirited resonance of the spoken word. Mqhayi's poems are missing from Couzens and Patel's anthology *The Return of the Amasi Bird*<sup>135</sup> as these were not originally written in English; however two appear in Cope and Krige's *Penguin Book of South African Verse*<sup>136</sup> in the translated Xhosa section. Mqhayi's poem "The Black Army," written in the *imbongi* style of praise poetry, draws attention to the role played by black South Africans during the Second World War when many Blacks<sup>137</sup> were able to enlist in subordinate non-combative roles to fight with the British. The Hertzog government ensured that black South Africans could not bear arms, but their time with troops abroad brought a freedom of movement not experienced in South Africa. To read Mqhayi's poem is to experience a gleeful playfulness and a humorous, jocular spirit which, conversational in style, sees off the troops with a "go catch the German Kaiser, bring him home / and cut this war short in a jiffy," with no illusions except that "you're sacrifices for the Black-skinned race."<sup>138</sup>

The currents of the Black Atlantic diaspora extended to South Africa. The ANC had supported the non-violent stance of Booker T. Washington, and the development of a human rights charter (discussed further in Chapter 5). Yet many black South Africans died fighting for democracy only to return home to the system of apartheid. Also in 1945, the year of Mqhayi's death and the end of the Second World War, Gwendolyn Brooks, the famous Afro-American poet and the first black person to win the Pulitzer Prize, published *A Street in Bronzeville*, her first collection of poems about the life of poor urban black Americans. Brooks went on to write poems about Mandela and with the South African exile poet Keorapetse Kgositsile and others published a guide to writing black poetry.<sup>139</sup> A later collection was entitled *The Near-Johannesburg Boy, and Other Poems* and *Winnie*. In that same year Léopold Senghor published his volume of personal, lyrical poetry *Chants d'ombre*, embodying, it has been argued,<sup>140</sup> French motifs and form typical of Paul Claudel's free-verse poetry. A fellow-traveller in Paris was Aimé

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<sup>135</sup> Couzens and Patel, eds., *The Return of the Amasi Bird: Black South African Poetry 1891-1981*.

<sup>136</sup> S.E.K. Mqhayi, "The Black Army and the Sinking of the Mendi," in *The Penguin Book of South African Verse*, eds. Jack Cope and Uys Krige (1968), 276-80.

<sup>137</sup> I have used the words "black South African" or "Blacks" when referring to this colour distinction made in South Africa in the years 1900-1990 unless "blacks" with a lower case "b" is used in a quotation.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>139</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks et al., *A Capsule Course in Black Poetry Writing* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1975).

<sup>140</sup> Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Prose and Poetry*, trans. John Reed and Clive Wake (London: Heinemann, 1965).

Césaire whose *Cahiers d'un retour au pays natal* was published by Penguin in 1956, with a translation by John Berger and Anna Bostock and an introduction by the South African exile poet Mazisi Kunene. Senghor became president of Senegal in 1960 while Césaire became a politician in his “native land” Martinique.

Senghor and Césaire had both adopted Césaire’s term “Négritude” to describe a “Negro” awakening, a conscious pride in being a black person. The influence of Négritude on African writing is immense if only as a means of defining difference. Mphahlele wrote to Senghor on his seventieth birthday expressing admiration for the politician and poet, yet making the sardonic comment that Senghor’s poetry was “sometimes emotion dripping schmaltz from the lush and grand ideas.”<sup>141</sup> For Mphahlele the Négritude poets were not true exiles as they accepted roles within the French political system (we could interpret this as another form of unity between politics and poetry). Kunene, who became South African Poet Laureate from 2005 until his death in 2006, wrote his own lyric poetry in his “native” (a loaded pejorative, racialized word in apartheid South Africa) language, Zulu not English. Zulu was his form of resistance: a resistance that took different cultural forms of expression in twentieth-century South African society from the early days of the Pan-African movement through the Sophiatown renaissance to the growth of the Black Consciousness movement under Steve Biko in the 1970s and 1980s.

After the war Senghor’s thoughts changed. He published a paper on *Marxism and Humanism*<sup>142</sup> in which he rejected the pure application of Marxism to Africa in preference for “African or Afro-Arab humanism.”<sup>143</sup> This notion of an African humanism occurred across the continent and in South Africa was used by Mphahlele, Mandela, Mbeki and others as a tool to reinvent humanism as an essentialist value in political and moral positions, as the fundamental practice of culture as resistance. It is a humanism of transformation, an idea found in the writings of the English Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, and realized in cultural production in parts of Africa. Njabulo Ndebele in his paper on “Liberation and the Crisis of Culture” commented that: “Indeed, the new dawn must be for them (white South Africans) something of T.S. Eliot’s ‘cruellest month’, inevitably bringing forth the humanity of blacks as a factor to contend with, after a past of moral slumber.”<sup>144</sup> In his writings, Es’kia Mphahlele positioned his view of African culture as inextricably linked to an African humanism. Commenting on American poetry in the 1960s, Mphahlele exhorted poetry or any form of culture to presume an audience; it must

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<sup>141</sup> Es’kia Mphahlele, *The Unbroken Song* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1981), 313.

<sup>142</sup> Léopold Sédar Senghor, “Marxisme Et Humanisme,” *La Revue socialiste* (March 19, 1948).

<sup>143</sup> Senghor, *Prose and Poetry*, 58.

<sup>144</sup> Njabulo S. Ndebele, “Liberation and the Crisis of Culture,” in *Altered State? Writing and South Africa*, eds. Elleke Boehmer, Laura Chrisman, and Kenneth Parker (Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1994), 5.

speak to others in whatever form it adopts even though, for Mphahlele, American artists, writers and performers often assumed their work could have no value beyond the present. He contrasted this with African literature which, he believed, had an imperative to represent both the past and present so that the present (for example, under apartheid) was given meaning. Dismissing Sartre's image of "Black Orpheus," Mphahlele grounded himself in reality: "My own empirical attitude toward experience tells me that as a South African product I have to attend more urgently and first to the defence of human dignity."<sup>145</sup>

Njabulo Ndebele also distinguishes South African culture from East or West by depicting the ordinary reality of everyday life as the culture of South African resistance.

Let us return to the year that Celan wrote *Todesfuge* (1952) and Faber published the first Nigerian novel available for local and international consumption, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* by Amos Tutuola. In South Africa the "Defiance Campaign" (The Campaign of Defiance against Unjust Laws)<sup>146</sup> had begun, culminating in the pass law protests of Sharpeville in 1960. Many South African writers were simply banned and it became impossible to publish or disseminate, leading to a wave of what was to become exile or prison writing from writers as diverse as the novelists Lewis Nkosi, Alex La Guma, Bessie Head, Njabulo Ndebele and the poets Wally Mongane Serote and Cosmo Pieterse. The exiliv poets Keorapetse Kgotsitsile and Dennis Brutus were just two of many who left South Africa in the 1960s. Whilst I have thought of the wasteland and the deathfuge as fellow-travellers, we cannot in any way though refashion Celan's *Todesfuge* into a metaphor for 1952 South Africa. Celan's "black milk," so redolent of death, takes on a different meaning in apartheid South Africa, where it was "a dry white season."<sup>147</sup> Language can elude us without its social inscriptions.

I wish to view the poetry of South Africans in exile under apartheid as dialogues, conversations, as *trusted* encounters which, to use Celan's words, "pass through frightful muting"<sup>148</sup> and can therefore represent our encounters with political and cultural discourse to create artefacts of cultural memory. How we perceive these encounters in scholarly or academic circles will create the discourses which determine whether these trusted encounters were, are, or can be, agents of change and transformation. As trusted encounters, there is an implicit altruistic appeal from an individual to a communal good.

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<sup>145</sup> Mphahlele, *Voices in the Whirlwind and Other Essays*, 151.

<sup>146</sup> Allison Drew, ed., *South Africa's Radical Tradition: A Documentary History*, vol. 2: 1943-1964 (Cape Town: Buchu Books, 1997).

<sup>147</sup> Mongane Wally Serote, *Selected Poems* (Johannesburg: AD. Donker, 1982), 52.

<sup>148</sup> Paul Celan, "Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen in 1958," in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, ed. John Felstiner (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 395.

## Chapter 2: The Heart of Exile

There are two ways, at least, to receive a testament and two senses of the word – two ways, in short, to acknowledge receipt. One can inflect it toward what ‘bears witness’ only to the past and knows itself condemned to reflecting on what will not return: a sort of West in general, the end of a trip which is also a trajectory from a luminous source, the end of an epoch, for example, that of the Christian West... But, another inflection, a witness, if the testament is always made in front of witnesses, a witness in front of witnesses, it is also to span and enjoin, it is to confide in others the responsibility of a future.

Jacques Derrida, *For Nelson Mandela*

At first I had no intention of voting: I felt that I had already voted with my life. Besides, I hated the very idea of standing in long queues at Home Affairs to obtain papers to prove that I was a South African. The idea seemed preposterous. I *was* a South African; moreover, I could boast of having spent half my life in exile to demonstrate that a South African, born on this continent, had high ideals to live for. To prove it, I had lived a miserable life in foreign lands, hunted and haunted by a government that I detested. I had lost my friends and close relatives...I felt that I was, had been, and will continue to be a committed freedom fighter....Democracy may merely be a trick by those who want to hoodwink the populace... I remembered an anonymous Zulu poem:

Like animals we lived, we a conquered race  
That once sang proudly to the beautiful mountains.

Mazisi Kunene, “Voting”

Why use exile as a trope to examine twentieth-century South African poetry?

That legislation authorizes restitution seems appropriately apt (given acts of appropriation) as it was legislation that produced some expressions of the exilic conditions of South Africa’s past. The romantic notions of alienation, detachment, journeying, longing or “inner flight” captured in *The Oxford Book of Exile* and largely spanning the modernist period, morph into fragmentation, travel, space and movement in the language of the postmodern. The concept of exile creates the now common tropes of boundaries and borders, of power enclosed, of restricted spaces, of people removed from certainty, a certainty that defines phenomenological moments within the English and American literary canon. Jameson depicted the idea of alienation in Munch’s *The Scream* as “a canonical expression of one of the great modernist thematics.”<sup>1</sup> Alienation and loss of self or identity were ideas central to interpretations of exile by literary theorists throughout the modernist period. The death of literary interest in unifying

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<sup>1</sup> Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 1, no. 146 (July-August, 1984), 61.



themes bound the concept of exile to different words; we move from the notion of “alientation” to “otherness,” “belonging” and “difference” contextualized within specific localities or texts. We could substitute these latter two words with a multiplicity of others within a very broad nexus of what is almost not named, namely the historically easy generalizations of colonizer and colonized. Each now rings with specificities represented by cultural, literary and sociological analyses: the servant, the worker, (mine, factory, migrant, garment) labourer, the prisoner, the singer, the teacher, the *baas* (boss), the student. Each individual, in a private or communal capacity, helps us to locate exile in and out of a South Africa which was always a polyglot of intertwined spaces, places and cultures engaging with land, velt, freedom, laager, homeland, township, today’s kasi kul’ca (location culture, also known as lokion kulcha<sup>2</sup>), silence, voice, song, difference, indifference. We almost return to a grand essentialism as if South Africa as a metaphor for exile existed as a biblical metaphor of itself; South Africa as a punishment, exclusion, an expulsion, a banishment and a state of mind, a people calling themselves “god-fearing” casting out difference into internal or external exile. But this, our exilic poets remind us, is a bleak reductionism. Today’s South Africa is a cosmopolitan blend of cultures and capitalism with its adjunct slums and violence and the ever-present problems of diseases such as AIDS.

### **The Story of a South African Exile**

The first excluded South Africans were the Dutch-named Bushmen (Khoikhoi) who, by the seventeenth-century, had been largely cast aside by the Bantu-speaking groups and were confined to parts of the east coast of Southern Africa. The arrival of the Dutch East India Company in 1652 further marginalized the Bushmen who fought to protect their own farming territory as the Dutch started to occupy their grazing and hunting grounds.

Alistair Spark’s *The Mind of South Africa* describes how one of the first tasks undertaken by the Dutch was to plant a hedge to keep the Khoikhoi out of Dutch-occupied territory, in other words the first laager in South Africa was constructed by a small community determined to maintain its Europeanness. Sparks writes that:

in fact the hedge was the second-best option. Initially . . . [they] surveyed the possibility of digging a canal from Table Bay to False Bay, a spectacular gesture of detachment that would have turned the Cape Peninsula into a European island literally cut off from Africa. <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Sarah Nuttall, “Stylizing the Self,” in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, eds. Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 94.

<sup>3</sup> Alistair Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1990), xvi.

With their backs to the sea, the Dutch redefined their idea of a frontier. Each inland trek was perceived, like that of Conrad's Kurtz, as a journey to the unknown. To maintain this separateness the Dutch had to force their way over multiple dialogues, resistances and cultures. For Sparks this detachment of the Dutch from Africa became a forceful symbol for the next two hundred years of South African history:

From the beginning they have regarded the people of Africa as 'aliens'. Foreigners from beyond the hedge or beyond the frontier or beyond the city limits, people whose real home was somewhere else, in a homeland 'far away out of sight.'<sup>4</sup>

This notion of a homeland is a common theme in South African history. The Dutch dialect Afrikaans, which was initially created by indigenous slaves as a means of communicating with their masters, became the language of a group who would later fight the British to retain their culture and what they saw as their "homeland." The slaves' descendants went on to develop a rich creole incorporating Malay, Dutch, Afrikaans and English, the influence of which can be seen in the poetry of Arthur Nortje, Adam Small and others. During the final throes of apartheid, Afrikaners would lash out at white English-speaking South Africans who could find a "home" elsewhere (by this they meant England); however, they declaimed, where were the Afrikaners to go when "home" was perceived to be South Africa, the Afrikaner language and culture, their extensive Afrikaans literature and what they believed was their land? The Afrikaners had even taken the name of the indigenous inhabitants of the country *Afrikans* (Africans). Language began to inform South Africa's social, literary and political history to create a racialized and radical site of struggle.

From 1948 to 1990 when the Nationalist Party governed in South Africa, various governments continued to use the symbolic hedge to divest themselves of opposition. This divesting or banishing of black South Africans was enshrined in draconian legislation. From early in its history, Robben Island became the enforced destination of many prisoners including Mandela. Located across Table Bay in the opposite direction to False Bay, a few minutes by boat from Cape Town and within sight of the mainland, Robben Island was initially as remote to prisoners and to other South Africans as the imaginary and real Galapagos. We find several examples of representations of islands and their place in political imaginaries – to name one other, the use by Australia, an island, of neighbouring islands such as Christmas Island or Nauru as processing centres for refugees or asylum-seekers. The Robinson Crusoe analogy and assumption is that an island is out of the way, a place to which people can be banished and exiled much as convicts were dispatched from Britain to Australia, a place where the British destroyed the lives of many of the country's original inhabitants, the Aborigines.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., xviii.

Apartheid, which developed officially after 1948 from many centuries of racial discrimination, was a legacy of the economic and scientific explorations of the seventeenth-century. Yet long after most of the former colonies had fought for, and gained, their independence, through the middle to late twentieth-century South Africa's apartheid system remained as a legislative and violent indicator of how biopolitics can destroy and construct notions of home and belonging. As we trace our tracks, poems and songs become documents which represent how writers and their audiences respond(ed) to the moral outrages of our age.

The South African exilic experience locates the personal within the political. Those excluded from political power or social empowerment, those exiled for a personal or communal commitment to transformation, had to cope with the burden of opposing the hegemonic control and bureaucracies of a society existing around, under or within a climate of repression. For those whose labour of opposition included writing, the act of writing became a representation of both self and otherness, a rhetorical device used to construct a political message and an altruistic gesture towards an unknown future that often resulted in the loss of self.

South African exile, with its multiplicity of meanings, is represented, endured and experienced in literature through the agency given to race, education and labour, all means of ensuring that South Africa became, and remained, economically viable as a modern capitalist state. Literature and poetry in particular, informs the history of South Africa.

According to Attwood<sup>5</sup>:

One of the ways in which this [black] intelligentsia encountered the culture of modernity was through the institutionalization of literature and criticism...mission schools, civil society (namely the press), philanthropic organizations and the universities.

Possibly, and I explore this further in chapter 5. Lewis Nkosi though scoffed at the idea of a black elite:

These white cultural critics have sometimes managed to produce a profile of a 'black elite' which is hardly recognizable to its supposed members . . . If we take the so-called *Drum* writers as representative of the fifties generation, it is surprising how few of them had any university education.<sup>6</sup>

The so-called black elite also came to cultures of modernity through contact with other countries and political rights discourse. Attwood's view encapsulates Gilroy's problematic: how to reconcile ways of discussing black subjectivity with our ideas of racial equality as described by rights theorists. Why do we still have these discussions? Gilroy proposes that we refuse "the modern, occidental separation of ethics and aesthetics, culture and politics"<sup>7</sup> and instead explore

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<sup>5</sup> Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History*, 84.

<sup>6</sup> Nkosi, "Postmodernism and Black Writing in South Africa," 79-80.

<sup>7</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 39.

the “unity of ethics and politics.” Is this the unity Couzens and Patel found expressed in the poetry of black South Africans? If as I suggest literature informs the history of South Africa, it is, as Gilroy reminds us, because the burgeoning nation-state cannot contain an ongoing desire for freedom in citizens exiled from (that they exile from) that right. Literature embodies this desire for freedom. Literary revolts from the censures of hegemony populate South Africa’s recorded history.

In 1688 French Huguenot refugees settled in the Cape. According to Vigne,<sup>8</sup> the first *published* work of “South African” literature was written by Pierre Simond and appeared in Amsterdam in 1704. Having arisen as a result of the multiple, conflicting demands of displacement on South African soil, this collection of poems *Les Veilles Afriquaines, ou les Pseaumes de David, Mis en vers françois (African night watches, or the Psalms of David, Put into French verse)* is one of the earliest published expressions in South African literature of the exilic condition. It is a sad story. Simond’s work was a labour of love which only materialized after he had discovered a book explaining how to write French poetry. The collection is an early version of the Psalms of David which became a voice for the French Protestant minority in South Africa, what Vigne calls their “battle-hymn.”<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless the labour-intensive and painstaking translation was rejected by the Dutch synod in Utrecht. The global confluences of this volume mirror the later experiences of writers such as Kunene or Breytenbach. South Africans went into exile in countries all over the world and this early French connection was preserved through several phases of South African political and literary history. Many exiled South African writers found sanctuary in Paris and there was a strong French intellectual involvement in the anti-apartheid movement.

Here is another and more recent example: in 2002 a French court offered a gesture of reconciliation to South Africa’s past. As the poet Percy Shelley and the social theorist Paul Gilroy have observed, the language of poetry (literature) and legislation speak to one another. Authorizing the restitution by France of the mortal remains of Saartjie (Sara) Baartman (known as the “Venus Hottentot” in South Africa), French Senator Nicolas About proposed a Private Member’s Bill.<sup>10</sup> In the process he read out to a French Senate session a poem written by Diane Ferrus: “I have come to take you home / where I will sing for you / for you have brought me

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<sup>8</sup> Randolph Vigne, “South Africa’s First Published Work of Literature and Its Author, Pierre Simond,” *South African Historical Journal* 39 (November, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Proposition De Loi Autorisant La Restitution Par La France De La Dépouille Mortelle De Saartjie Baartman, Dite "Vénus Hottentote", À L’Afrique du Sud, Ordinaire 2001-2002: Annexe au procès-verbal de la séance du 4 Décembre 2001, 114.*

peace.” In a defining moment, it took the legislative power of this contemporary French Senate to end the exile of the remains of Saartjie Baartman, the Khoi South African taken by two entrepreneurs, one Dutch and one British from South Africa to Europe in 1810 as an object of physical curiosity to be displayed in a cage for a European gaze, and finally, tragically, dead and in parts, interred in bottles in the Museum of Man in Paris. This story has had so many iterations that the bare facts seem to strip the life from the person. The Baartman story should be read as a symbolic embodiment of exile in the full Shakespearean sense to understand the resonating triumph this poetic act represented. Saartjie Baartman returned home in a symbolic post-colonial moment, the apparently random result of a poem written by a lonely South African living in Amsterdam which caught the attention of a French Senator and the imagination of newspaper journalists around the world.<sup>11</sup> Of course, the story is more complex and has been the subject of many books, a film and documentaries.<sup>12</sup>

Symbolic acts of return speak to us not only of notions of home and belonging but also of rights and justice. They seem to represent the ethics of comradeship, society’s undefined moral heart. We can return refugees to their home but is it truly a home where they belong? Or should we welcome people who make perilous journeys to our home and by so doing hope that eventually they will feel they belong? If home might be a place of music, or the internet or a poem, then we do not need to belong spatially to a geographic place as we wander through the media of living; unless, suddenly, or interminably, or in/ and de/terminably, others ensure, dictate or legislate for us that there is no place at all. Saartjie Baartman’s place was a cage, and then horrifically, a bottle. Today the Saartjie Baartman Centre for Women and Children publishes poetry written by victims of violent crime.<sup>13</sup> Home becomes the place inscribed and created in words.

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<sup>11</sup> Chris McGreal, “Homeward Bound,” *Guardian Weekly*, February 28-March 6, 2002, 26; Suzanne Daley, “Exploited in Life and Death: South African to Go Home,” *The New York Times*, January 30, 2002, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Deborah Willis, ed., *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her ‘Hottentot’* (Philadelphia, Pa: Temple University Press, 2010); Zola Maseko, “The Life and Times of Sara Baartman: ‘the Hottentot Venus’.” produced by Philip Brooks and Harriet Gavshon, directed by Zola Maseko. South Africa: Dominat 7, 1995.

<sup>13</sup> Saartjie Baartman Centre for Women and Children, “In Our Voice,” accessed May 12, 2010, [http://www.saartjiebaartmancentre.org.za/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=57&Itemid=60](http://www.saartjiebaartmancentre.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=57&Itemid=60).

In 1982, the South African government's Department of Cooperation and Development tabled the "Orderly Movement and Settlement of Black Persons Bill."<sup>14</sup> Dubbed the Genocide Bill, the bill was merely a next step in over thirty years of complex and intricate legislation designed to strip black South Africans of South African citizenship and legally delimit where people could reside, work or walk. Part of this process was to move about twenty-one million people (seventy-one percent of the population in 1982)<sup>15</sup> out of the urban areas and into homelands.

Here are some of the words which were used since white settlement in 1652 to 1990 to describe black South Africans and their places of residence: souls, urban blacks, african people, bantu, township resident, migrant workers, citizen of a homeland or bantustan, internal homeland citizen, migrant homeland citizen, commuter homeland citizen, malay, indians, coloured, blacks, surplus people, farm workers, black spots, natives, pass law offender, squatters, black persons, urban africans, workers, permanent resident, prescribed area, disqualified persons in controlled areas, group areas, urban areas, locations, townships, authorized persons, unauthorized persons, permanent urban residents, honorary whites, non-white, non-European , and so on.

When the 1950 Population Registration Act defined Coloured as "not a white Person or a Black"<sup>16</sup> there were such protests that amendments were made to include the definitions "other Coloured" or Griqua. It is not surprising that the journalist Nat Nakasa asked: "Who am I? Where do I belong in the South African scheme of things?"<sup>17</sup> Nakasa later killed himself in New York.

The idea of belonging to a country is a Western one bound up with Enlightenment theories of language and history. Tony Judt explains how the boundaries of Europe itself were far from tidy before World War II: "The continent of Europe was once an intricate, interwoven tapestry of overlapping languages, religions, communities and nations."<sup>18</sup> It is arguably accepted that the concept of nationhood could be said to have begun with what Hall calls the "global"<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Florence Maleka, "Statement at the Meeting of the Special Committee against Apartheid in Observance of the International Day of Solidarity with the Struggle of Women of South Africa and Namibia," accessed September 15, 2008, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/library-resources/speeches/florence-maleka-statement.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa* .

<sup>16</sup> South African History Online, "Twentieth-century South African History: Umzabalazo, the Liberation Struggle: Legislation," accessed May 6, 2010, [http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/governance-projects/liberation-struggle/legislation\\_1950s.htm](http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/governance-projects/liberation-struggle/legislation_1950s.htm).

<sup>17</sup> Nat Nakasa, *The World of Nat Nakasa*, ed. Essop Patel (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1975), 158.

<sup>18</sup> Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 8.

<sup>19</sup> Hall, "Reinventing Britain: A Forum," 38.

expansion of 1492. Greenblatt<sup>20</sup> has extended this thought to propose the idea of cultural mobility, also starting in 1492. Post-colonial theories have served literary theory well as a kind of reparation for the dominance of the Western canon and for colonial notions of citizenship or language. At least in cultural circles, wherever or whatever these may be, “the ambivalence of the nation as a narrative strategy”<sup>21</sup> produces diverse definitions of country or nation or of equality. Hall maintains, and I agree, that the “notion of the global,” is not one of equality – rather, on the contrary, a notion of the “profoundly unequal.”<sup>22</sup> The unequal and poor in political discourse join the displaced, marginalized or exiled in literary or cultural discourse in what Bhabha calls “the poetics of exile”<sup>23</sup> or Njubi the “politics of exile;”<sup>24</sup> those “citizens” whose becoming of self is continually being rewritten, redefined and relocated often within the bounds of a country.

In his discussion of postmodernism and late capitalism<sup>25</sup> Jameson considers what happens when the conceptual world can no longer be held apart from the real. In Fanon and Bhabha’s terms an obsession with the other as alien intruder could be interpreted as an obsession with self-identity, with homogeneity or globalisation as discourses which threaten concepts of nation, belonging and self, the exile within. By not being able to identify the “fourth wall,”<sup>26</sup> the space between the signifier and the signified, those cross-border meeting points, we meet “a sign of resistance.”<sup>27</sup> These signs of resistance gain signification through repetition, a plea for reception.

Here is a well-known extract from Mongane Wally Serote’s poem “For Don M – Banned”:<sup>28</sup>

It is a dry white season  
dark leaves don’t last, their brief lives dry out  
and with a broken heart they dive down gently  
    headed for earth  
not even bleeding.  
it is a dry white season brother,  
only the trees know the pain as they still stand erect  
dry like steel, their branches dry like wire,

<sup>20</sup> Greenblatt et al., *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*.

<sup>21</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “Dissemination,” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 292.

<sup>22</sup> Hall, “Reinventing Britain: A Forum,” 43.

<sup>23</sup> Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 5.

<sup>24</sup> Francis N. Njubi, “African Intellectuals in the Beast of the Belly: Migration, Identity and the Politics of Exile,” *Mots Pluriels* 29 (2002), <http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP2002fnn.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” 53.

<sup>26</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 48.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>28</sup> Serote, *Selected Poems*, 52.

indeed, it is a dry white season  
but seasons come to pass.

André Brink was later to call one of his novels *A Dry White Season*. Bhabha's metonymic moments invoke the exile who, for Bhaba, is someone moving between borders perceived as a non-being with a non-identity who becomes a witness. Here in Serote's poem is the assertion of being.

It is worth remembering that in the arts the same product is perceived as having different value depending on its representation and hence is given different receptions. If exile as a recognized or acknowledged thread appears in our readings of poetry, disappears and reappears in time, it is due to the very nature of poetry itself, which absorbs, translates, constructs or even deconstructs the value of this metaphor within literary discourse. The lack of grounding of the notion of exile can be read as disclosing exile poetry as a passing through, a moving rather than movement, an enforced settlement somewhere else, which, in western fiction, appear as phases in each nation's literary canon having been copiously codified.

And so an exile departs, or is forced to physically depart from, or leave, a place or companions, almost a temporary or permanent exit from a continuing history of self where the link of the present to the past is physically broken. Like Titlestad,<sup>29</sup> Gilroy and others, I believe that poetry or music provides the exiled writer with a narrative of history, as does the very notion of exile, both of which maintain a sense of the whole or complete or continuous self in the face of a physical disruption: "I am the exile"<sup>30</sup> or

Yes  
We drift  
Country to country: drift?  
I move!<sup>31</sup>

Drifting is too uncertain. Here Mabuza asserts her right to choose what she calls her exile: "I move." Mabuza asserts her right to her whole, continuous self.

In this way South African poetry played a unique role in maintaining hope and optimism by providing the writer or speaker with the strength to continue to speak. Derrida is (was) insistent that each "trace" of writing is a living act of the death of the writer as the trace becomes its own life in the eyes of the reader – "the courage to surrender or render oneself, through

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Titlestad, *Making the Changes: Jazz in South African Literature and Reportage* (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 2004).

<sup>30</sup> Dennis Brutus, "I Am the Exile," in *A Simple Lust: Selected Poems Including Sirens Knuckles Boots, Letters to Martha, Poems from Algiers, Thoughts Abroad* (London: Heinemann, 1973), 137.

<sup>31</sup> Lindiwe Mabuza, "Embracing Exile," in *The Return of the Amasi Bird*, eds. Tim Couzens and Essop Patel (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982), 392.



repression, to what takes place here in language.”<sup>32</sup> Exiled South African poets and activists such as Dennis Brutus and Wally Serote used poetry or language *per se* to reclaim a self and a society, as well as a country, to create a meaning or a home for the self outside the self in cultural or political action, rather than only in landscape, nation or state. “I am alien in Africa, and everywhere,” Brutus writes, “only in myself, occasionally, am I familiar.”<sup>33</sup>

I have argued that South African exilic culture cannot be read as a marginalized art form as it played a part in the ongoing cultural transformation of the country. This is in spite of a comment by Brutus during the height of the State of Emergency in the 1980s that South Africa was “a country which is desperately poor culturally. It has no art, no music, no ballet, no theatre, and more or less bad plays from Broadway or Piccadilly or wherever.”<sup>34</sup> Brutus had been in exile and was not involved in, or even aware of, the dynamic culture that informed everyday life in South Africa. The rewriting of South African literary and cultural history has buried this myth but it is important to see this comment as prescient, as an expression of the tension that was to continue between the world view and history of the returned exiles and the experience of those who remained inside South Africa during apartheid. For some activists who were in exile and no longer part of this culture, South Africa seemed barren of the liveliness and energy that they found abroad.

Writers of South Africa’s literary histories of the apartheid years enter complex and diverse communities of cultural production. The critical assessments of literary output are as various as the creativity itself. While much of the output was inevitably a reaction to or product of discrimination, exclusion and apartheid, post-apartheid the arts have continued to flourish at all levels of community. What differs is the extent to which writers, artists, singers, performers look outside the country for an encounter, audience or readership. During the apartheid years many writers were exiled by internal deportation, house arrest or imprisonment, or were exiled to other countries some of which included communities of exiles preparing for liberation, i.e. the ANC in Tanzania. If some artists or writers had one eye turned outwards to the global community, it was not in the traditional master-servant colonial relationship, but as an active attempt to engage with cultural boycotts, bannings, censorship, embargoes, covert publications, or simply to engage in a critical or trusted encounter. Conferences, meetings, conversations, were

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<sup>32</sup> Jacques Derrida, *H.C. For Life, That Is to Say...* trans. Laurent Milesi and Stephen Herbrechter (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 138.

<sup>33</sup> Brutus, “I Am Alien in Africa,” 121.

<sup>34</sup> Ed Ferguson, “South Africa and the Olympics: An Interview with Dennis Brutus,” *Ufahamu* 13, no. 2-3 (1984), 45.

held all over the world. In 1987 a conference in Amsterdam (*Culture in Another South Africa*)<sup>35</sup> brought together exiled and resident South African cultural activists who discussed a range of issues such as “what happens to the writers, painters, actors, film-makers and photographers when they try to carry on their work in conditions of exile?”<sup>36</sup> Even today Ndebele envisages a similar role for South African writers:

What emerges is a self-referential reflection in which social being replaces race as a direct frame of reference. The emancipatory and humanitarian thrust of this emergent, resuscitative trend seems located in that replacement. How have younger South African artists, writers, dramatists, and filmmakers reflected in their work this possibly formative *suspect*, reconciliation with history – the history of responsibility?”<sup>37</sup> This question will have a long future.

Exiles participated in the writing of South Africa’s cultural present by privileging the arts as agents of change.

### **To Remind the Living**

The imprisonment and exile of people in Southern Africa was the result of legislation, language, violence and repression which were manipulated for a large part of the twentieth-century by the hegemonic powers which colluded with this repression. After the Second World War in Europe, the initial preoccupation of European writers and philosophers focussed on how to continue beyond the terrible destruction and negation of life. This preoccupation also appeared in the modernist South African exilic writers. Mazisi Kunene wrote “Eichmann and his ilk,” aware that that perpetrators of evil “roamed the world filled with songs of death.”<sup>38</sup> Here ilk refers to the repressive South African regime.

In 1966 the South African Government promulgated a “notice in terms of Section Ten *Quin* of the Suppression of Communism Act, 1950 (Act No 44 of 1950), as amended” which banned 46 people, many of them writers and journalists. The list of those banned was divided

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<sup>35</sup> Willem Campschreur and Joost Divendal, eds., *Culture in Another South Africa* (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1989).

<sup>36</sup> Hilda Bernstein and Wally Serote, “Interview, London 1990,” in *The Rift*, 335.

<sup>37</sup> Njabulo S. Ndebele, “Suspect Reconciliation!,” Nelson Mandela Foundation, accessed August 29, 2010, [http://www.nelsonmandela.org/index.php/dialogue/annual-lectures/dialogue\\_with\\_ariel\\_dorfman/suspect\\_reconciliation/](http://www.nelsonmandela.org/index.php/dialogue/annual-lectures/dialogue_with_ariel_dorfman/suspect_reconciliation/).

<sup>38</sup> Bernth Lindfors, ed., *South African Voices*, Occasional Publication (Austin, Texas: African and Afro-American Studies and Research Center in association with the Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas, 1975), 23.

into “Whites –Blankes” and “Non-Whites – Nie-Blankes”<sup>39</sup> (literally not whites). Thabo Mbeki, who would become South Africa’s second post-apartheid President, was among those banned. The “Gagging Clause” of the General Law Amendment Act (Sabotage Act) No.63<sup>40</sup> saw the banning of many more writers as well as allowing the death penalty for what were deemed acts of sabotage, legislating for ninety-day detention without trial. Another section of the Act was specifically amended so that PAC leader Robert Sobukwe would not be released after serving a full prison sentence.

In the introduction to *The Penguin Book of South African Verse*, Cope and Krige comment:

With the darkening of political horizons currents of seriousness or of dissociation spread further in South African writing. There has been little inclination to experiment for its own sake....Dissociation [has led] many on the English-speaking side into exile, either voluntary or perforce.<sup>41</sup>

Experimentation was present though in the risk many writers took in voicing their opposition to apartheid. Experimentation meant taking Shelley’s treatise to heart and deciding that poetry could enact change by giving voice to communal opposition within conventional poetic forms. Poetry had to be taken to the people to show that traditional literary conventions could be transformed into courageous vehicles of resistance.

*Poets to the People: South African Freedom Poems* was published outside South Africa in 1974. Both the first and the second enlarged edition are dedicated “to South Africa’s political prisoners and to the ANC and its allies.”<sup>42</sup> The significance of this publication should be acknowledged: poetry would be taken to the people as a deliberate strategy both to give voice to exiles as well as to provoke a defiant response to the banning orders. Many ANC publications were also to provide a publication platform for writers in exile.

J.B. Booth (a pseudonym for Dennis Brutus)<sup>43</sup> exhorted writers to action in spite of the “Gagging Clause”: “they must both as individual writers and as a community of artists take

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<sup>39</sup> Union of South Africa. *Notice in Terms of Section Ten Quin of the Suppression of Communism Act, 1950 (Act No 44 of 1950), as Amended*, R.510.

<sup>40</sup> Peter D. McDonald, *The Literature Police: Apartheid Censorship and Its Cultural Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 33.

<sup>41</sup> Jack Cope and Uys Krige, eds., *The Penguin Book of South African Verse*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 21-22.

<sup>42</sup> Barry Feinberg, ed., *Poets to the People: South African Freedom Poems* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1974), Dedication. As additional poems are published in the second 1980 edition, both editions are cited in footnotes.

<sup>43</sup> Lee Sustar and Aisha Kaim, eds., *Poetry and Protest: A Dennis Brutus Reader* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006), 46.

action against the barbarians.”<sup>44</sup> J.M. Coetzee returned to the image of barbarians in his novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, both writers alluding to Cavafy’s poem<sup>45</sup> of the same name.

Brutus’ call to action makes references back to the Nazi era as the spectre of burning books haunts his words. He calls for a cultural boycott of South Africa but reminds us that it is in the conscience of individual writers that change will begin. Here we again find echoes of Shelley’s belief that tracts of writing should be persuasive as oppositional documents for communal use.

This is the stark reality many South African writers faced. To continue writing constituted an act of courage, bravery and altruism as the self faced its own demise. While writing was often an adjunct to political activism, many of the poets discussed in this chapter saw themselves primarily as writers. In the case of Arthur Nortje exile led to death, whether accidental or deliberate. Brutus was shot as he tried to escape from a prison van. This reality, the threat of death, stalked the exile, the political prisoner and the ordinary citizen who was not a citizen as we discover in Truth and Reconciliation testimonies. In addition to possible death by torture, parcel bombs followed exiles to other countries (Ruth First was killed by a parcel bomb in Mozambique where Albie Sachs lost an arm when his car was blown up.) The sixties was a period of great repression in South Africa and resulted in the Rivonia trials and subsequent imprisonment of Nelson Mandela and many others on Robben Island. Exile became an attractive option for writers both as a means of continuing to write, as well as to serve the ANC or other liberation organizations.

After the end of both the Cold War and Vietnam, representatives of a new, more alert and widely engaged world consciousness became involved in oppositional South African politics and culture. Given the enforced cosmopolitanism of many South African exiles, their adopted homes contributed to anti-apartheid activities. In France, Derrida contributed to a festschrift for Mandela, organised an anti-apartheid art exhibition and began to deconstruct “apartheid” as a word and a philosophy. In many of the exilic poems of this period language becomes simplified, in part to explain apartheid and in part as an appeal. Past experience had shown that civil gestures or overtures such as letters or requests had been ignored and hence negated. The drumming echo of the message repeated the long silences of solitary confinement or imprisonment or banning. This new, more welcoming world awareness and reception urged repetition of the message. Expression became flattened, more rhetorical and strident. An

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Constantine Cavafy, *The Collected Poems*, trans. Evangelos Sachperoglou (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 15.

audience grew within South Africa as the communal appeal of exilic poetry became more widespread. Exile was no longer a separate label applied to a solitary individual. The ANC developed as a government in exile and the publication of poetry in its newsletters and journals was actively sought and promoted. While we have seen how the role of writing informed the dominant structures of South African society as well as the apartheid governments, the ANC created the Writer's Congress as one means of promoting the struggle for freedom through writing. Thus the exile was accorded or rewarded with the role of agent of change. The ANC proceeded to develop an alternative "official" culture to combat the dominant ruling culture. Yet even within the ANC there was vast diversity in writing and experience. Some ANC exiles felt distinctly alienated for example in Nigeria where the Nigerian government wanted PAC and ANC to join to become one organization and put aside political differences. Others rejoiced in the freedom of the "outside" world, the "other" as friend. This difference of experience is reflected in the diversity of the poetry. The production of writing was often communal in spirit within the ANC with the product, the poem itself, being sent off as an emblem of hope. But for the prisoner or exile the poem was often a solitary act.

Writing about South African poetry in 1975, Richard Rive argued for the relevance of poetry to temporality as a reflection of the moment.<sup>46</sup> His insider view of South African poetry broadly divided poetry of the 1970s into "Liberal poetry" (being "poetry written by Whites essentially for Whites on their politico-moral responsibility towards Blacks,") "Protest poetry" ("written by the Blacks themselves for whites in order to articulate their discontent and rebellion of their treatment") and "Black Consciousness poetry" ("the poetry by Blacks for Blacks.")<sup>47</sup> Rive views "protest poetry" as "amateurish and dismal,"<sup>48</sup> with writers presenting themselves as victims addressing a white audience. He similarly dismissed Black Consciousness poetry as "mediocre and insignificant."<sup>49</sup> Rive's comments are typical of judgements made from a particular position within the South African literary field<sup>50</sup> of that time. I would agree with Rive that the defining moment of such poetry was its very temporality, but I suggest that such poetry carried an immediate concern beyond the self for other victims of oppression too and hence an altruistic belief in seizing the moment to write change or to write hope in the construction of a poem. Looked at from this perspective, South African poetry of the seventies is still modernist

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<sup>46</sup> Richard Rive, "Poetry in the South African Situation," *Pro Veritate* 13, no. 11 (1975).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>50</sup> Peter McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

with dadaesque or futuresque overtones, though Rive calls much of this writing “hysterical, screaming and declamatory.”<sup>51</sup>

Nevertheless Rive raises an issue that did affect the perception of published black poetry in South Africa in these years, namely that to be published or to rise to a level of critical acclaim among the white community was often seen as a condemnation of the poet in question. Pandering to the white community could attract the label of traitor and in this respect there was some pressure on poets to be overtly political in both style and message. Inherent in this view was the idea of the poem as engaged but in some way distinct from common language, representative but original, and in all instances not “salving and propiating [sic] white people’s guilty consciences.”<sup>52</sup> Similarly there was pressure on critics not to praise poetry simply because it was protest poetry. So while Rive criticises Mongane Wally Serote for his overt polemics, but finds in him moments of poetic reprieve, writing in a SASO Newsletter Mandlenkosi N. Langa praises Serote for his raw understanding and depiction of life in the townships, reminding us that these vivid, restless, terror-filled poems resulted in Serote’s arrest under the Terrorism Act. The State, it seems, did not discriminate on the poetic power of the writer (although at times the censors did, as Peter McDonald points out in his fascinating book *The Literature Police*) and each arrest of each poet, regardless of literary merit, confirmed a state apparatus privileging the power of language to resist and provoke. Small magazines, newsletters, political publications all published articles critical of protest or black consciousness poetry and yet they continued to provide a vehicle for the publication of this poetry, recognising its ability to provoke the State. With acts of altruism, these poets continued to offend. Addressing an Afro-Asian Poetry Symposium in Erevan, Armenia, Feinberg calls these poets “warrior poets”:<sup>53</sup>

Poetry of all the arts is supreme in its ability to aspire selfless action by humanising the political slogans of our revolution and stirring the social consciousness of the individual. The revolutionary poet concretises the dreams of people for a better life: the liberation movement fights to make those dreams a reality.<sup>54</sup>

This could be Percy Bysshe Shelley: “The most unfailing herald, companion and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is Poetry.”<sup>55</sup>

Poetry during the 1970s and 1980s was also referred to as a “poetic renaissance” or a “‘new’ aesthetic.”<sup>56</sup> Xihoshe broadens his discussion of the historical factors influencing South

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Mandlenkosi N. Langa, “Arts and Letters: Reviews: ‘Y’akal Inkomo’ Poems by Mongane Wally Serote,” *SASO Newsletter* November/December (1972), 16.

<sup>53</sup> Barry Feinberg, “Poetry and National Liberation in South Africa,” *Sechaba* 3, no. 2 (1974), 22.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Major Works Including Poetry, Prose and Drama*, eds. Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 700-701.

African poets to include the British Romantics for their interest in “nature, in the past and the future, their awareness of substantial change and the need to support its progressive and to fight its negative features.”<sup>57</sup> The courage of the first generation Romantics is endemic to both the expressed and assumed attitudes of many of the exilic poets discussed in this chapter. Other influences noted by Xihoshe include the influences of American realism on South African novelists. The exiled poets and singers were specifically influenced by, and in turn influenced, the Harlem renaissance, Négritude and the Black Power movement, a dialogue that was reflected in political and literary influences.

At times writers for publications of the ANC, which was a non-racial organization, appear compelled to explain why they concentrated critical appraisal on black South African poetry, pouring scorn on reliance on white avenues of publication. The contested nature of publication in South Africa arguably gave exiles an advantage in that their choice of publisher was defined by factors of association in their countries of exile rather than the lack of choice faced by those within South Africa.

Debate on the quality and purpose of South African poetry written during the period 1960 to 1980 was to influence the poetry of exiles who were writing in a number of milieus: those of political repression, community activism, personal responsibility, political affiliation, creation of an aesthetic or personal response to political action as well as embracing the pressures of exile, loneliness, uprootedness, language and cultural differences. These pressures were compounded by the critical assessments of their writing by colleagues subject to the same pressures, who judged their voices in terms of their historical links, their audience, their reception and their historical roots (see for example Kelwyn Sole<sup>58</sup>). There was initially suspicion of sloganistic poetry; interviews with academics looking back at that period show the disagreements and development of the relationship of this poetry to the changing political culture. It was probably fortunate for the poets as well as the political rhetoricians that poets and theorists such as Sole attempted to steer the debate about exilic poetry away from notions of “‘good’ and ‘bad’ literature either on a moral or abstract aesthetic basis only,”<sup>59</sup> arguing instead for a historical understanding which would focus on differences in ideology within the factors influencing the production of writing. I would support Sole’s contention that, for those in exile,

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<sup>56</sup> Mokoena Xihoshi (sic although also found as Xihoshe), “Poetry Towards the Revolution,” *Sechaba* August (1981), 27.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>58</sup> Kelwyn Sole, “Problems of Creative Writers in South Africa; a Response,” *Work In Progress* 1, (1977).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

dislocation from the past resulted in a dislocated literary artefact which was either personal or political. So we find a distinction between poetry written outside the country, or in prison, and poetry produced for an audience within the trade unions, community movements or political organizations within the country. I will use the ANC term “inziles” for the exiles within the country to convey that sense of enforced exclusions and terror from which the inziles could not resile.

The poetry of South Africans in exile, inzile, was published in a plethora of newspapers, journals, official political publications, books and edited collections. As we have seen, repression has the potential to create Bhabha’s in-betweenness, or Benjamin’s remade texts, or as Eagleton calls them, the “wayward, extreme and contradictory elements”<sup>60</sup> of ideas. In his 1999 anthology *Ten South African Poets*, Shwartzman attempts to “develop and promote critical sensibilities that cut across and negate the various sets of exclusive and intolerant notions in South Africa of what constitutes the poetic.”<sup>61</sup> Through the diverse poets he chooses runs a trope of belonging and exile, as well as “waywardness.” This waywardness is evident in the eclecticism we find in the poetry while certain symbols or tropes appear and reappear with surprising regularity.

In an interview Helena Sheehan conducted with the poet Jeremy Cronin, Cronin mentioned how demoralized he found his exiled colleagues in London and Lusaka. Cronin has spoken movingly about how he needed writing to create a geography for himself during his imprisonment, to define spatially somewhere he could place the poetry of imagination. Cronin experienced the exilic sense of abandonment of the past and saw how writing poetry could become a means of remaining connected to a present that was happening in spite of, not because of, the poets’ involvement with political events in the present and past, a past which could then be recreated in writing as an altruistic gesture of solidarity with comrades and the self. Cronin, Kgositsile and others had to project themselves into many imagined trusted encounters:

Remember  
When you are sick and tired  
Of being sick and tired  
To remind the living  
That the dead cannot remember.<sup>62</sup>

Through their poetry, we experience the cries and howls of these poets who were aware of only a limited audience, often other exiles or expatriates, in spite of attempts by these very poets in their capacities as cultural ambassadors for the ANC or as academics to give a wider

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<sup>60</sup> Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, 118. Here Eagleton is commenting on Benjamin.

<sup>61</sup> Adam Schwartzman, ed., *Ten South African Poets* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), 4.

<sup>62</sup> K. William Kgositsile, “My People No Longer Sing,” in *The Return of the Amasi Bird*, eds. Tim Couzens and Essop Patel (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982), 283.



voice to the magnitude of political repression in South Africa. Many poets in exile or inzile did view their poetry as resistance poetry for the political intent of writing was fostered by the ANC. In some circumstances poetry was the primary means of keeping a sense of self and community real and alive. Although the condition of exile did, in many circumstances, unite poets who had much in common, in fact the circumstances and particularities of each personal and political struggle make for very different histories of the cultural or creative product.

There were numerous potential audiences for the poetry written by South Africans in exile: much of the writing was addressed to outsiders as an attempt to explain South Africa but has often been judged by the same literary criteria used for writers in very different milieus. Reading the poetry, certain narratives emerge often centred on the self, the land, the political, the struggle, with generalizations about Africa and its people. Edward Said characterizes the writing of the exile as awash with anxiety and overstatement. Yet some of the language used in the poetry of South African exiles is sparse and perfunctory, almost emotionless.

Biographical detail is one factor that informs the act of writing, performing or publishing poetry inside or outside South Africa. Who you were, the conditions of exile or imprisonment, being affiliated or not with the ANC or other liberation movements become crucial factors in our understanding of the literary field, of the ways in which personal preoccupations became a lived part of being an exile and a poet. The lives of many exiles are testimonies to an engagement with South African politics, whether with the anti-apartheid movement, the political geography or landscape of South Africa, or indeed the literary field within South Africa itself.

The act of writing was often the only means of expression or way of coping with exile or inzile. In South Africa poems were not always written in solitariness but for those exiles and prisoners who found themselves alone, writing enacted the silence and solitariness of confinement, the alienation of exile. This act redeemed the emptiness of the cell or the loneliness of being among strangers and hence created meaning, a sense of belonging, albeit to the act of writing. Ahmed Kathadra stressed the need to create a “normal” society on Robben Island, a home of sorts when you anticipated being there for the rest of your life. In addition writing was already a profession, occupation or preoccupation for many exiles who then had to deal with the effect of the pressures and contingencies of exile on their writing. In Hilda Bernstein’s book *The Rift*,<sup>63</sup> interviews with many South African exiles reveal their tremendous need to write and the difficulties they encountered in doing so, particularly among those writers who left the country after their work was banned in South Africa. There was also the pain of writing about a country

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<sup>63</sup> Hilda Bernstein, *The Rift: The Exile Experience of South Africans* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994). Further citations of this work are given in the text.

from which they were in exile, coping with loneliness, depression and strangeness or learning another language. For others, exile brought personal liberation which sometimes extended to liberating their writing. The interviews in *The Rift* highlight the political consciousness or activism of most exiles so that this activism necessarily informs various approaches to writing. Common to all is an expectation of movement towards change in South Africa:

I was always writing about South Africa, in the fiction and the poetry. I could never comprehend the American human landscape. I couldn't feel it, I couldn't smell it, I couldn't comprehend it – and I never tried. Despite all the years in between I was resisting being sucked into the environment of my host country (Mphahlele, 56).

By resisting writing the new environment, while resisting the oppression of the old, Mphahlele was caught in the nowhere land of being in exile. He continued to write as a South African in order to resist the effects of exile, always also being identified by others as a South African writer through his long and illustrious engagement with literature.

One must do something to fight against this [apartheid]. At that time, I really committed myself to the idea that that the only way to do this was through writing . . . Exile is an assault on creativity. It's very criminal to be in exile. And of course the full blame for this goes on to the apartheid system which forced us out (Serote, 330).

Like Mphahlele, Serote returned from exile before 1990, in Serote's case from Botswana where he had started the Medu Art Ensemble to "identify the relationship between politics and cultural work" (333). Medu consisted of a group of cultural workers primarily in exile from South Africa who worked on creative expression as a means of political resistance. In 1982 the group organised a conference in Gaborone entitled "Culture and Resistance."<sup>64</sup> Serote faced the very visible conflict between generations, the different struggles against apartheid which confronted those within the country, the *inziles*, and those in exile: "But now I have to listen five times to make sure what I'm hearing is correct. I'm making up for the distance between me and the life of my people" (335).

So Serote wrote poems which were the result of thinking, listening, hearing, reflecting five times over, to make sure the words were true representations of his ideas, his reflections of home, the environment he heard in the words of those who had stayed behind. He travelled hopefully towards a home of sorts. For Laurretta Ngcobo, a novelist, writing was also a source of reflection:

When I started writing, I was trying to retrace my steps, to find out if there'd been different choices I could have made. I felt coming to the Western world was the

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<sup>64</sup> It is interesting to note that the exiled South African writer, Bessie Head, was not involved in this event which included not only South African exiles, but writers and artists and performers from America, Europe and other parts of Africa, including Botswana. Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o also participated in the conference.

greatest mistake of my life . . . In fact, one good thing about Great Britain was the anonymity it gave me . . . that anonymity was new and was wonderful for me (353).

Thus exile brought the freedom of anonymity, freedom from surveillance, a freedom to do ordinary, everyday tasks without worrying about one's actions, despite the strangeness of being a stranger, of not belonging. Being a stranger meant no-one being interested in you, who you were, or where you were from — and so the past was negated. You were born an adult with no symbols in common with your neighbour. For Mazisi Kunene:

. . . setting out to write . . . gives the next generation a heritage which is really worthwhile, which they will be able to celebrate... it is not a demoralised people who create masterpieces. It is their spirit that revolts against demoralisation and against their marginalisation. So I see that responsibility (357).

Kunene wrote in Zulu and identified himself as an African writer whose responsibility was to the generations to come. For Kunene it was immaterial whether his readers, whoever and wherever they might be, understood his poems: “if you are born with a hundred people, it is your responsibility to record their experience” (357). This is a preoccupation of many writers in exile: the need to record communities under threat so that readers may understand what has vanished. In Kunene this responsibility also carries through to poetic form as he continued to write praise and epic poems: “One cannot be happy away from one's home. I am not. I always ask myself why I am here. . . . Isolation is highly creative because I have been able to do a lot of work” (358).

Kunene created a home of sorts by writing but even this engagement did not remove the ache of exile.

Return does not always bring the exile home: John Matshikiza writes movingly of his return to South Africa<sup>65</sup> and his meeting with an extended family he did not know. Thuli Dumakude, who worked in theatre in exile, was “happy to be home but I was very depressed, very, very depressed” (371). Inevitably for some exiles returning becomes another exile, this time from the imagined home which is found to no longer exist. An activist, Peggy Stevenson, was shocked by the changes she found on her return to Johannesburg after being away for 28 years. Her experience in England had transformed her: “I have become a human being here” (403). For Stevenson the experience of exile is a normalising experience where the humiliations and degradation of apartheid disappear. There are amusing anecdotes in Bernstein's book of first encounters with equality and also the shock of this experience for people such as the Becks who

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<sup>65</sup> John Matshikiza, “Very Tall: (a Biography of Todd T. Matshikiza). Prologue: Notes of a Journey of Towards a Biographical Exploration,” accessed June 18, 2009, <http://wiserweb.wits.ac.za/PDF%20Files/wirs%20-%20matshikiza.PDF>.

intuitively did not sit next to whites on a bus in Denmark as they did not know they could. The wife of an activist, Emily Dennis, was pragmatic about exile:

Being in exile is being in exile. You are separated from your family, from your home, from your culture even. In exile you learn to live with other people....Here in exile we say 'comrade'; and you can really live as comrades, which is really different from what you can do in South Africa (430).

Dennis found another community, the community of exiles who lived as equals outside South Africa. Tembeka Ngeleza, whose husband joined the ANC in exile, was concerned that returning to South Africa would be a loss of camaraderie: "We victims, we who are exiles. We are all of us victims" (441). And Prennaven Naicker, in a far cry from Brutus's troubadour, said: "I feel an alien everywhere" (481). Many exiles worked or wrote with pseudonyms so that identity and belonging were reconstructed, sometimes numerous times in many different countries.

Acknowledgment of the plight of comrades, fellow exiles, mentors and those left behind, is a recurrent theme in the poetry of South African exiles. There is also a natural desire to form solid relationships in exile or in prison. Dennis Brutus imagined these relationships in the form of lyric poetry. His need for love is expressed by a deliberate infusion of lyricism into the brutality of imprisonment. In the absence of any relationship or contact with a fellow human being, writing becomes the means of this contact, the expression of hope that a voice will be heard. If a person or prisoner has been cast out, imprisoned or exiled, writing on paper, on the floor, the walls, on scraps hidden away sometimes to be found and destroyed, becomes the means of survival. Zinjiva Nkondo (Victor Matlou) wrote that the "greatest loss" he had in his life was when the book he had started to write was destroyed and flushed down the toilet:

Sometimes, to keep myself occupied I used to write poems, and memorise them and be able to recite them . . . I used to write poems... and I even started writing a book. But they just destroyed it and put it into the toilet. That's the greatest loss I had in my life.<sup>66</sup>

For the exile, writing offered solace both for change and continuity.

Nkosi also reminds us of the colonial exiles, administrators and civil servants who took up posts in the far-flung Empire only to find that they too became detached from their roots and found a synergy in their newly adopted country, often falling naturally into the role of superiority required of them by their governments. Thabo Mbeki returned from exile in England and many judged his personality as conflicted, representing a stereotypical English aloofness that did not sit well with his African renaissance, while lacking leadership in dealing with South Africa's AIDS crisis. Others such as the writer Justin Cartwright who grew up in South Africa and voluntarily

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<sup>66</sup> Hilda Bernstein and Victor Matlou, "Interview," in *The Rift*, 77-8.

left the country for England when he was twenty,<sup>67</sup> returned to visit South Africa in the first few years after the end of apartheid and concluded that all that bound people together post-apartheid was apartheid.

In the end South Africans faced the demise of the laager as the natural government the ANC, a government prepared in exile and apparently as unified and nationalistic as the Afrikaners claimed to be, took its rightful place. Fifteen years after the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, there are diverse views about the ANC's success in government. The period of the exiles' return takes its natural historic course with the breakaway of some ANC members to form another political party, the Congress of the People (COPE), the name given to the 1955 gathering which created the ANC's Freedom Charter. The current, and at times controversial, South African president Jacob Zuma (who also spent a period in exile) was seen as a conciliator within the ANC during the tense periods prior to 1990 when Mandela's negotiations with the Zulu Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi were unpopular within the ANC. So the current South African leadership is still informed by the experience of exile.

### **South African Exilic Poetry and Song**

For most of the twentieth-century, South Africa's political exiles trundled through languages of otherness which refuted or ignored the representations behind their words, thus denying the very need for change in South Africa. Perceptions, legislation, lack of interest, vested financial interests, global power struggles, all these factors constructed different representations of South Africa to the world outside South Africa, a world portrayed as primarily interested in South Africa's vast mineral wealth or its rugby prowess. South African exiles, exiled from both within and without, exiled from the language of power by apartheid, had to imaginatively construct and reclaim their freedom through an alternative language, one that could be heard (even if not read) and understood by the majority of South Africans, and also, crucially, by the moral conscience of an audience abroad. The mere act of persistence with the endeavour of writing in these circumstances was an altruistic one. Early and repeated peaceful attempts by the ANC to change politics within South Africa failed. Recourse to language, to writing, was an attempt "to achieve solidarities on an imagined basis."<sup>68</sup> Said's moral alternative became a force for change within South Africa in its many forms and guises.

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<sup>67</sup> Justin Cartwright, *Not yet Home: A South African Journey* (London: Fourth Estate, 1997).

<sup>68</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 260.

The disparate memories of South African exiles are also an important discourse in framing the future. A reference point in contributing to the narratives of the future is to thus examine popular memories of the past in whatever form they are presented. These memories are often symbols of a personal and sustaining hopefulness.

When asked if he was a political writer, Dennis Brutus responded:

I believe that the poet – as poet – has no obligation to be committed, but the man – as a man – has an obligation to be committed. What I am saying is that I think everybody ought to be committed and the poet is just one more of the many ‘everybodies.’<sup>69</sup>

Brutus’s poetry carries representations of moral responsibility by documenting, by speaking/voicing and by refusing to change his natural mode of being, representations which validate poetry as constructed in Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry* as a medium of natural opposition to repression and inequality. Brutus’s poetry represents a journey to the heart of an exile, the need to recognize the moral centre of the self in relation to the moral bleakness outside the self. In Brutus’s poetry the recognition of the heart of self is recognition of selflessness, of altruism, particularly in relation to apartheid. To combat the loss or lack of imagination, loss of empathy in others, required an act of rebellion, an imaginative leap in which writing assumes the role of agency.

This concept of the imagination divested of self or of ego is central to Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry* and partly explains why Brutus was diffident about and indifferent to his output, as opposed to his belief in speaking, or the act of writing — voicing or giving voice, as an act of defiance during the apartheid years. Each history, in Berger’s sense,<sup>70</sup> has its own language: the use of language to produce poetry as a response to political events is not unique to any one country or period of time. In its political role poetry may be defined by cultural specificity, yet is usually removed from (moving beyond dominance and marginality) canonical status outside the academy until poetry is fused into song when its status in society changes. And if poets are not quite Shelley’s “unacknowledged legislators of the world,”<sup>71</sup> poets who defy a political order in whatever literary form are often literally taking their belief from Shelley’s disavowal of convention and his belief in the power of poetry to enact change. As Shelley understood, so poets

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<sup>69</sup> Dennis Brutus, “Talk Recorded in Austin in February 1970,” in *Africa Talks Back: Interviews with Anglophone African Writers*, ed. Bernth Lindfors (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2002), 57.

<sup>70</sup> John Berger, *The Shape of a Pocket* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001).

<sup>71</sup> Shelley, *The Major Works Including Poetry, Prose and Drama*, 701.

in exile understand too that poetry is a potent means of engaging with the political, if only at an unhappily imposed distance.<sup>72</sup>

The state of personal freedom represented by immersion in literature has been movingly described by Ahmed Kathrada<sup>73</sup> and David Grossman,<sup>74</sup> the former in relation to his incarceration on Robben Island, the latter as an Israeli writer. Both describe the act of reading and writing as an encounter with a world not encumbered by the specifics of time or place. For Kathrada, reading represented a mental freedom during his thirty years of confinement on Robben Island. For Grossman, struggling to understand the actions of his own government, “I write, and the world does not close in on me. It does not grow smaller. It moves in the direction of what is open, future, possible.”<sup>75</sup> Writing reaches into the future; a poem takes its moment and moves towards an ever-present us, a message in a bottle.

I have used McDonald’s term “the literary field”<sup>76</sup> without prior explanation, all those facets of literature which have multidimensional interrogations with the political, social and economic environment. The condition of being exiled from South Africa during the apartheid years is yet another aspect of the South African literary field. McDonald aptly demonstrates that the conditions of literary production create the value accorded to literary output. Depending on the nature of this production, poetry could be seen, negatively or positively, as culture for the masses or as a marginalized cultural product in the marketplace. The historical debates on the function of art in many societies around the world demonstrate the extent to which cultural output has been accorded value depending on the philosophical, political and social factors which give meaning to the creative or functional endeavour of what is deemed “literature.” We could plausibly build a case supporting the argument that, with small publishing numbers, limited profits and varied reception, poetry written in exile could be considered culture’s literary exile, usually directed towards a minority audience. However a great deal of resentment was, and is still, directed at what is derogatively known as the protest poetry of the 1980s. For such an exiled field to evoke such ire we might need to redefine our literary exile. To that end, by substituting the word “song” for poetry, we enter a different discourse, one of popularity, even celebrity and mass audiences.

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<sup>72</sup> Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England*, 25. T.S. Eliot utterly refuted this point of view calling Shelley’s claim “the highest point of exaggeration.” (Ibid.)

<sup>73</sup> Ahmed Kathrada and Tim Couzens, *A Simple Freedom: The Strong Mind of Robben Island Prisoner*, No. 468/64 (Sydney: Hachette Australia, 2008).

<sup>74</sup> Grossman, *Writing in the Dark: Essays on Literature and Politics*.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>76</sup> McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914*, 4.

Thus it is necessary to consider the extent to which the poetry of South African exiles has been accorded value, in particular, the value given to their writing by the poets themselves as well as by both their immediate contemporaries and by us, wherever we might be. In South Africa, the concept or idea of poetry is both elevated and deflated, thus representing both sides of the literary paradigm as well as the state of exile: a moving through, a representation of a passage forward. However poetry can only have a high profile within a society if it is privileged in some way; in South Africa poetry came to be representative of “Culture” and a symbol of urgency much as “Africa” and “Exile” became symbolically rich and significant symbols of resistance.<sup>77</sup> Having been in exile still carries some symbolic resonance in South Africa’s current power structures. As we have seen in discussions of popular poetry, culture is a fluid, shifting term. Here I refer to Tomaselli’s placement of the word in the South Africa of 1986 and use the word myself to mean in its contested form, “culture as strategy” and as “the ‘passport’ to group survival.”<sup>78</sup>

The poetry of South African exiles is filled with recurring images and symbols. Some poems are simply recitations of these symbols. The idea of the mother is present in many poems of the early twentieth-century, Africa as the mother evokes images of belonging and rootedness, the very opposite of the experience of exiled poets. In the patriarchal, masculine society that was, and remains, fundamental to the South African ethos, the image of the mother is that of the bearer of children and the maker of sustenance. Symbols of blood, rivers, spears, prison, chains, slaves, sky are customary images which are wrought, strangled and familiarized by the circumstances of exile in an attempt to remain within tropes of landscape and lyric poetry. Evans and Seeber maintain that: “Writing in particular has been ‘locked into’ a restrictive dialectic concerned with class, race and landscape, a trend from which the oral forms and protest writing of the populist 1980s was but a brief diversion.”<sup>79</sup> Some South African writers in exile subverted the lyric, using this form to fulfil Shelley’s intention for poetry to enact change. This paradigm in turn assisted the exile to move beyond self to expressions of courage and altruism.

The centrality of poetry, song and music in South Africa is at once as Evans and Seeber imply a cliché, a contested notion and a documented one, not only in the scholarly literature but also within the poems themselves which question the role of poetry on a personal as well as

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<sup>77</sup> Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1965).

<sup>78</sup> K.G. Tomaselli, *A Contested Terrain: Struggle through Culture. Inaugural Lecture Delivered in the University of Natal. Durban, 4 September 1986* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1987), 14-15.

<sup>79</sup> Nicholas Evans and Monica Seeber, eds., *The Politics of Publishing in South Africa* (London and Scottsville: Holger Ehling Publications and University of Natal Press, 2000), 6.



political level. In many parts of the world, the 1970s saw an increase in political expression via song, poetry, theatre or performance, and in South Africa the songs and poems multiplied particularly in the seventies leading up to the Soweto riots. Adorno's concept of writing as home in the face of destruction seems an appropriate metaphor: poetry became not a literary exile, but integral to the construction of the exile's idea of home and community. Thus as the Government's physical destruction of large, settled urban areas in South Africa attempted to destroy historically unified communities, poetry became a potent means of recording and engaging with a vanishing past. We thus have a curious unity: poems written inside South Africa as well as outside the country representing ideas of home, of the lost mother Africa whose role was to nourish and provide. Words were used within the country to obfuscate, to distort what we might consider to be normal or humane, all the while ensuring a horrendous, legalistic nightmare designed to engender confusion and fear. Many of the poems written in exile were simple and clear with no ambiguity and hence accessible when read to large audiences with no education. These images also provide the comfort of points of identity, for example by creating an imaginary home or providing a form of acceptable expression of what cannot be expressed politically. The poems draw you into their pain, here you are no stranger. Some of the bleaker poems engage with the language of oppression and expose sores seeping with depression and anger. We will see too that women poets sought their own voice in which the image of motherhood or motherland presents different symbolic representations and significations of exile.

The power perceived to exist in literature in South Africa resulted in the banning of books, poems and people. These were legislated attempts to silence belonging, to silence equal claims to land. At the same time, legislation tried to erase the voices of black opposition leaving the exiles with a responsibility to become the conservators of an archive of resistance. The sense of moral responsibility that Shelley saw as the poet's purview was also a burden that exiles carried into their poetry. They would become the voice of the erased until these voices were indelible. Oppression occurred through convoluted distortions of the traditional meanings of words through the tracts, the laws, edicts, re-education camps, education systems, blemished and tarnished texts, sanitized newspapers, radio, cinema, banishment and through violence. The same medium, *le mot juste*, drives resistance, opposition, the struggle for meaning and memory. The poems of exiles convey images of representation that tell a different story across different borders of being. The images and representations of this continual dialectic produce a multiplicity, a hybridity of discourses, many narratives being told to a possible and hopefully positive reception by many readers and critics. Always a hopeful praxis – even in despair, anger or isolation, with a glimpse of their own historical record...

### Chapter 3: Trusted Encounters

Reachable, near and not lost, there remained in the midst of the losses this one thing: language.... But it has to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through frightful muting, pass through the thousand darkneses of deathbringing speech. It passed through and gave back no words for that which happened; yet it passed through this happening. Passed through and could come to light again, "enriched" by all this.

Paul Celan, "Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen in 1958"

Language, embedded in published or spoken language as poetry or song, travels across the globe to us here, now, anywhere. As writers and readers we can choose to accord poetry the agency to represent an ethical future, urging us as to pause, reflect and act. The fact that so many exiles create representations of this recurring trope through the media of poetry and song, and that exile was represented within the phase of modernist poetry in both developed and developing countries, enables us to use the notion of exilic poetry as a way of reaffirming the historical importance of poetry as an agent of cultural memory and change.

#### Exile and Humanism

The language of rights begins with an altruistic gaze. If we examine the remarkable archives of the ANC, we find documents which show how consistently the ANC wrote and presented the case for human rights in South Africa.

In 1952, for example, the ANC wrote a letter to the South African government explaining the reasons for the start of the Defiance Campaign, namely "the elimination of the exploitation of man by man and the restitution of democracy, liberty and harmony in South Africa."<sup>1</sup> The then South African Prime Minister, D.F. Malan, replied:

You will realise, I think, that it is self-contradictory to claim as an inherent right of the Bantu who differ in many ways from the Europeans that they should be regarded as not different, especially when it is borne in mind that these differences are permanent and not man-made. If this is a matter of indifference to you and if you do not value your racial characteristics, you cannot in any case dispute the Europeans' right, which in this case is definitely an inherent right, to take the

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<sup>1</sup> African National Congress, "ANC Historical Archives. Exchange of Correspondence between the African National Congress, the South African Indian Congress, and the Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa between 21 January and 20 February 1952," accessed June 10, 2003, <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/struggles/correspondence.html>. (ANC website reconstituted and this document is no longer accessible.)

opposite view and to adopt the necessary measures to preserve their identity as a separate community.”<sup>2</sup>

It is perhaps fitting that these words from an anti-British and increasingly isolationist government, are grounded in the great age of exploration, the beginnings of colonialism. Malan’s discourse of difference, his insistence on what *cannot* be and his assumption of the need to preserve an apparent European (white) identity, has its roots in the beginning of the slave trade and the subsequent struggle of nineteenth-century abolitionists to explain contradictions in the writings of their age.

The limits of Enlightenment thinking can be exemplified by two contrasting nineteenth-century views. On the one hand we have Sir William Lawrence, an abolitionist, friend of and physician to Shelley, pontificating that:

The differences which exist between inhabitants of the different regions of the globe, both in bodily formation and in the faculties of the mind, are so striking, that they must have attracted the notice even of superficial observers.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand we have Shelley writing a Declaration of Rights in 1918 in which he states:

Man, whatever be his country, has the same rights in one place as another, the rights of universal citizenship. No man has the right to monopolize more than he can enjoy; what the rich give to the poor, whilst millions are starving, is not a perfect favour, but an imperfect right.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to the standard analyses of the egotistical sublime as being the thread binding the Romantics to nature, Debbie Lee presents an alternative view, arguing convincingly that the Romantics’ theory of imagination demanded an acknowledgement of writing as a forum for recognition of otherness, a denial of self rather than an absorption with self, and the adoption of an ethical position in relation to the great moral questions of the age. Similarly we can read dissenting South African voices in the contexts of current theories of self, culture and exile.

Toni Morrison explores dissent in relation to North American literature and criticism. Both Morrison and Gilroy contend that the North American identity as represented in literature is predicated and constructed around the African (black) presence in the United States with Barack

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<sup>2</sup> D.F. Malan, “ANC Historical Archives. Exchange of Correspondence between the African National Congress, the South African Indian Congress, and the Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa between 21 January and 20 February 1952,” accessed June 10, 2003, <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/struggles/correspondence.html> (ANC website reconstituted and this document no longer accessible).

<sup>3</sup> Sir William Lawrence, “Lectures on Physiology, Zoology, and the Natural History of Mankind Delivered at the Royal College of Surgeons 1819,” in *Theories of Race*, ed. Peter J Kitson, *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999), 311.

<sup>4</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Declaration of Rights,” in *Works in Verse and Prose* ed. Harry Buxton Forman (London: Reeves and Turner, 1880), 397.

Obama now becoming symbolic of the long history of the Black Atlantic in the United States. Morrison turns around the moral assumptions implicit in much North American literature and looks at how American writers created ideals such as freedom from their awareness of the African history of America. Morrison questions the constraints on writers who write from within an accepted assumption of what American literature stands for; for her "imagination" is all about the process of "becoming."<sup>5</sup>

Wole Soyinka also believes that there should be more than the reading, retelling and preservation of exilic literature to acknowledge the inhumanity of experiences such as slavery or political exile. The harm of the past can only be resolved by reparation, not by commissions of truth and reconciliation. Soyinka insists on his own moral position while addressing what he calls "the thesis of comparative humanism."<sup>6</sup> He dismisses a comparative or relativist approach to human suffering, degradation or reparations. Instead he sees monuments or evidence of the horrors of the slave trade as:

indices of Truth, an essence and a reality that offer any people, however impoverished, a value in itself, a value that, especially when rooted in anguish and sacrifice, may dictate a resolve for redemption and strategies of social regeneration.<sup>7</sup>

This is Soyinka's language but could also be Shelley's one hundred and eighty years ago; a defiant stance against comparative ideologies which might weaken the extent of the dislocation, death and destruction people have brought on others in the name of humanism, colonialism or nationalism, or as in Shelley's time, exploration and the slave trade. Soyinka calls himself "a humanist, actively engaged for most of my mature existence in confronting all encroachments on the self-retrieval of my kind."<sup>8</sup> This is also Soyinka's defiance against what he perceives to be valueless theorizing. He defines humanism in relation to history, memory and reparation, particularly the need to make reparation to descendants of slaves. Soyinka argues the case for reparation as the only just moral action.

Yet in Soyinka's own interviews, plays and poetry, and indeed from a poet such as Dennis Brutus, we read that the exile's telling of a tale, the testimony, the appeal, serves in itself as an *act* of healing the damaged heart of the narrator. This act of patching the wound, repairing, is what Brutus works towards in his poetry and ultimately must lie at the heart of the exile's dilemma: how to repair the fractured and battered self when we can see from current processes

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<sup>5</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination. The William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness*, 54.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-60.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

of reconciliation that, on the whole, there will be no reparation and often no chance of repatriation or return. Sokinka's plea for reparation takes the issue directly into the arena of legislative justice and moral responsibility.

I propose that representations of the moral responsibility of individuals and societies towards one another are defining moments of the exilic experience as both an attempt to repair and to move beyond the self towards a solidarity of resistance, to a becoming- history.

What is the purpose of a moral position represented by the act of writing? As Said, Morrison and Gilroy have said, we construct our version of history. Historians ask questions such as Lee does in relation to the Romantic era and slavery: "what is the relationship between the nations' greatest writers and the epic violence of slavery?"<sup>9</sup> I construe in Lee's response a new way of reading texts, texts as seen through a twenty-first century romanticism. We are responding to or analysing texts or history in moral terms, in terms of those emotional and psychological characteristics that can be said to make a person a good human being, an altruistic person. For Lee, the Romantic poets represented empathy through the very process of imagining. If we create a relationship between imagination and political signifiers, we create meaning out of an activity which could otherwise be read as potentially meaningless activity in times of turmoil. As Brutus did we give value to language which has otherwise been, or could be, debased and effaced.

Language, here read as the heart of an exile's displacement, the voice not heard, can also be read as the progenitor of an exile's defence through the act of writing. Rather than a defence of poetry, we have poetry as a defence, as a restitution of language. Writing becomes an antidote to, or escape from, the obfuscation of the language of repression, of propaganda, censorship and officialdom, and hence a moral force in search of an audience.

It is possibly this detachment from what has been that literature tries to regain. Poetry in particular, by drawing on the language of exile as if it is an inevitable exile, attempts to frame or create a future that might or might not be or have been. And not just as a modernist phase in literature, but as a part of what Derrida might see as the hidden possibility of justice, the secret in the subjective.<sup>10</sup> In much of the philosophical writing of the twentieth-century, including Marxist theory, this possibility of a return to the creation of being protrudes into notions of survival, creation, hope and history. In some ways, literature becomes a translation of being much as politics can effect the same transformation from without.

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<sup>9</sup> Debbie Lee, *Slavery and the Romantic Imagination* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, eds. Giacomo Donis and David Webb, trans. Giacomo Donis (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2001).

## Politics and Poetry

What marks out the relationship between poetry and politics in twentieth-century South Africa from other junctions or crises of history, other than the fact that both its poetry and politics were born of the politics of difference? Primarily I take Gilroy's position that given a plantation, the slaves created their own imaginary outside the experience of the landowners. For Gilroy this situation arose because the plantation was out of reach of the state's legislative powers. In South Africa, the state's powers were out of reach of humane legislation and hence out of reach. To reach a humane-ness then is to unite politics and poetry in an ever-hopeful imaginary of what becomes a utopia.

Helene Cixous reflected on two different historical situations, Osip Mandelstam in Russia and Nelson Mandela in South Africa, to unite them in a tribute to memory and hope. They are "two men who do not know each other, but the same sorrow knows them."<sup>11</sup> MacGillivray charts Cixous' thought on the relationship of poetry to politics from 1980 when she wrote "Poetry Is/and (the) Political," seeing poetry as inherently political, to 1988, what MacGillivray renames: "The Political Is- (and the) Poetical"<sup>12</sup> in which a poetic intent is found in our personal relationship to history. The politics of literary intent frame Shelley's idea of the poet as legislator. The relationship between politics and poetry appears so evident in exilic poetry that it comes as no surprise to find that the major critical writings in this area usually develop from countries in or just out of political crises, or from those working within a complex Enlightenment legacy.

South African exiles were to make homes in England and the continent, Eastern Europe, America, Cuba and even the Far East. Their influences were initially far removed from the traditions of protest in these countries. Hugh Masekela has spoken about his arrival in America at the height of the civil rights movement and its impact on him on a personal level. Arthur Nortje arrived in England and found a terrifying foreign-ness around him. Other histories had an immediate impact on the composing and writing that ensued. However the literary history of adopted countries also contributed to the social realities of South African exiles.

We know that there was an established Marxist literary tradition in England. The British political poets of the thirties were derided for their middle-class origins. Fanon discussed the

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<sup>11</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Manna: For the Mandelstams for the Mandelas*, trans. Catherine MacGillivray and with an introduction by Catherine MacGillivray (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), xv.

<sup>12</sup>Catherine MacGillivray, "Introduction: The Political Is – (and the) Poetical," in *ibid*, xvii.

Marxist colonial bourgeoisie in relation to an African middle-class who became wealthy on the labour of their poorer black comrades. This outlook is a contested site of struggle in South Africa today. In his introduction to *Poetry of the Thirties*, Robin Skelton commented on the “self-conscious”<sup>13</sup> myth-making of the thirties poets. Marxist literary criticism was not dominant in Britain during this period although politics dominated literary life. The first Marxist literary magazine, the English edition of *International Literature*, was published in Moscow, not England. The Communist Party was formed in Britain in August 1920, three years after the October Revolution and two years after the end of the First World War. In South Africa the Communist Party began in 1922. Membership of the British and South African Communist parties was always much lower than in Europe and was of a fairly transient nature. In contrast to their European counterparts, both British and South African communists were less doctrinaire and more tolerant of discourse between communists, socialists, Labourites, Fabians and non-communists/socialists, the British Labour Party being the biggest of its kind outside Germany. In South Africa, the Communist Party is still in a governing alliance with the ANC. The long-established English liberal tradition, about to confront its own decline with the economic upheaval of the thirties and the rise of fascism, preserved its inherent structure and tradition by allowing for a broad range of challenges to its orthodoxy to exist within it. This tradition was faced with the development within its ranks of a radical intelligentsia, radical politics being the result of domestic and international crises such as the Great Depression and the Spanish Civil War.

Most British Marxist literary critics (with the exception of Alick West) were against modernism. Writing in 1934, John Strachey singled out Joyce and Proust as examples of the betrayal of the continuity of a great tradition. What tradition was this Marxist one? Not one that saw politics left out of art. The mix of politics and literature espoused by Auden, Orwell, C. Day Lewis, even Eliot (although Eliot was on the opposite side to the others and took a stand against the Popular Front in the *Criterion* of October 1938),<sup>14</sup> were absorbed easily into, and almost dominated, the orthodox English canon during the thirties when the Left Book Club had a membership of over 10,000. West, Ralph Fox and Christopher Caudwell have found their way into few texts of literary criticism although problems of relating Marxist ideology to criticism affected most writers of the period. Caudwell and Fox died fighting with the International Brigade. Alick West was still writing literary criticism in the 1930s Marxist tradition until his

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<sup>13</sup> Robin Skelton, ed., *Poetry of the Thirties*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), 13.

<sup>14</sup> Arnold Kettle, *Literature and Liberation: Selected Essays*. eds. Graham Martin, W.R. Owens, and introductory essay by Dipak Nandy. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 101.

death in 1972. As we shall see in the next chapter, South African literary theory was informed by African humanism, a strong Leavisite tradition as well as an Althusserian Marxist approach based loosely on historical materialism and a dialectical socio-historical framework.

To name only two instances of a direct relationship between culture and politics, British literary practice in the 1930s and the civil rights movement in the United States in the 1960s confronted writers with an inescapably political choice. By using the term “Apartheid” as defined by Derrida to mean the last racism (a metaphor for lack of rights of law), we discover that writers everywhere face the same choice while lack of rights still exists anywhere in the world. Yet, in many situations this choice could only be made by blurring the distinction between politics and cultural practice. Leavis, *Scrutiny* and the Leavisite tradition attempted to prove that culture could stand outside politics, against change and discontinuity. For Bullock<sup>15</sup> the principles which produce revolution are common to both romanticism and Marxism, a belief that consciousness is the determining factor of material social relations. Political conscience confronts the writer mostly during periods of historical upheaval. Poetry and politics are both products of engagement. To do a Derrida on engagement, there cannot be a desire to engage without disengagement, detachments, non-belonging (Derrida's term). If a desire for engagement is to be more than a desire for the very state (political entity or state of being) that produced disengagement, we must ask (as Derrida asks of forgiveness), with what, or with whom, or why, do poetry and politics wish to engage? And is the relationship between the poetic form and the political simply a tendentious one, both being expressions of a belief in the future? I believe there can be a poetic act (without explanation). The gesture, trace or tracks of poets in Britain in the thirties was a poetic act, just as is Cixous' determination not to let memory fade, to bear witness too. Likewise in South Africa poetic form gave way to poetic act as inseparable from political engagement. For many writers this engagement had the same purpose as Cixous' writing (writing when Mandela was still imprisoned) to give voice to the voiceless and to the self. In South Africa where the self was exiled, to engage was to transform poetic language into political language. For Cixous, Shelley, Derrida and Brutus, writing becomes the transformation of the political into a political act of poetry.

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<sup>15</sup> Marcus Paul Bullock, *Romanticism and Marxism: The Philosophical Development of Literary Theory and Literary History in Walter Benjamin and Friedrich Schlegel* (New York: P. Lang, 1987).



## Derrida and Shelley

Bernasconi asks,<sup>16</sup> as do I: “Why introduce deconstruction here at all?” What is the connection between Jacques Derrida and South African politics and poetry under apartheid? Derrida freely admits his debt to a philosophical tradition acknowledging Kierkegaard, Husserl, Heidegger and the French existentialists Sartre and Marcel. “Basically the sense of desire and commitment I had when I read Rousseau, Nietzsche or Gide as a very young man is still with me.”<sup>17</sup> Here I would like simply to point out Derrida's remembrance of his youth, and return to this point later in my discussion.

Bernasconi's answer to his question was that Derrida had tried to break a western metaphysical position which had embraced humanism and also created racism. Derrida discussed how his everyday thoughts and actions took place with the knowledge of death uppermost in his mind. In his later writing, perhaps with the possibility/finality of death approaching, Derrida invoked the past in a way not immediately evident in his earlier work. His belief in Kierkegaard's subjectivity expressed the political. For Derrida, “I find literature desirable for its own sake, but that for me it also represents this ‘of experience and of existence’ in its link to language” (41). This singularity of experience tried to engage with the artefacts of political thought through language.

The language of a philosophical and political western tradition incorporates and allows its own opposition, but within subscribed limits. So for Derrida, the opposition or the alternative needs to be “deconstructed” so that its creation, its construct, that which allowed it to be, can be revealed. To jump back to South Africa, since colonisation a steady and sure language based in a humanist tradition constructed apartheid. Its deconstruction became both a political and poetic act of challenging or changing the language of apartheid. Just how deconstructed is apartheid? If we take apartheid as a broader metaphor within the western world for lack of justice we must consider Derrida's challenge to philosophy and the state about the true meaning of humanism and at this point, we withdraw.

In South Africa from the 1960s onwards poetic language takes on the role of opposition. Conventional poetics is pared down to the basic necessity of language to repeat the historical message of humanism. Dennis Brutus in his tribute to Albert Luthuli, *For Chief*,<sup>18</sup> writes:

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Bernasconi, “Politics Beyond Humanism: Mandela and the Struggle against Apartheid,” in *Working through Derrida*, ed. Gary B. Madison (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 105.

<sup>17</sup> Derrida and Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, 40. Further citations of this work are given in the text.

<sup>18</sup> Dennis Brutus, “For Chief,” in *Poets to the People*, ed. Barry Feinberg. Enlarged ed. (London: Heinemann, 1980), 4.

Should one despair  
knowing how great the power  
how unavailing opposition

He answers himself:

Yet your great soul  
asserts a worth —  
transcendent humanity.  
There is valour  
greater than victory:  
Greatness endures.

Could Derrida be said to have construed the political as a political act of poetry? He values language and the role it plays in our conscious redistribution of power. For Grosz, “Derrida has never written on anything other than politics and violence.”<sup>19</sup> Her argument centres on the notion that for Derrida, all positions have been chosen with “inherent undecidability.”<sup>20</sup>

Brutus accords “Greatness” a capital. What is this “transcendent humanity,” this Greatness? The “allowed” opposition or true Justice? For Derrida and Bernasconi the means of creating a culture in which violence is displaced is to disrupt existing social hierarchies. Mandela made a conscious decision to reverse the hierarchy to displace apartheid. We see a becoming “transcendent” in Mandela’s speeches and writing as well as through the words of the exilic poets and the brave testimonies put forward at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Derrida privileges memoirs “as the general form of everything that interests me” (41). If, for Derrida, philosophy has “always been at the service of this autobiographical design of memory,” (41) we can then take a collection of poets or of poetry, a “gathering together” which “defies all gathering” and see the memoir of a people and a time which was the past becoming and making the future. By remembering and reminding, we restore a subjective being to words being displaced and cast aside by the course of the becoming-future. We begin to answer Derrida’s desire to know: “Who? Who asks the questions who? Where? How? When? Who arrives?” (41) questions which address exilic South African poetry under apartheid. This is a plea for the importance of life lived, the individual/state dichotomy which so troubled Shelley. The self is born into the power of the state.

What informs Derrida’s writing is the knowledge of non-belonging. In *A Taste for the Secret*, Derrida talks about his status as a French-Jew in Algeria who was removed from his school due to anti-Semitism. As a result he had a lingering sense of not wanting to be part of anything, neither a community nor a family, nor a state of rejoicing in the state or “secret” of

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<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, “The Time of Violence: Deconstruction and Value,” *College Literature* 26, no. 1 (Winter 1999), 8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

“non-belonging” (40). Can we apply Derrida's idea of “the totalitarianization of democracy” (59) to South African exile poets who had to put aside “the secret” (self) and “parade (d) in the public square,” (59) to be paraded in the public square? If these poets in their non-belonging joined with another (for example the ANC, each other) to “belong,” how easily they could lose their sense of selves, selves put aside for the “struggle.” Would it not be a struggle to abandon all aspects of the self to a cause? We see this dilemma over and over again in the poetry of the exiles despite a desire and belief in communal duty, natural solidarity and unity. In prison, Mandela had his own doubts that he had failed in his moral duty as a father and companion. These same ambiguities surface in interviews with many South African exiles who cast aside the personal for the political. Of the poets represented in the anthology *Poets to the People*,<sup>21</sup> the personal and the political cannot be separated because they are re/presented as the one. For the poets this unity was never so simple or always apparent.

Derrida argued that to lose yourself in the community or the family is to lose your ability to recognise the individuality and “alterity of others” (27). Derrida did not “consider me ‘one of you’”; he wrote, “don't count me in” (27). If the South African poets in exile do indeed write independently, singularly, of the great hope for justice, they certainly addressed the political will of a people clambering for change. These poets addressed not other poets, but Shelley's “people”; their voices had been heard by the dominating community, in this case the state, and were banned or silenced precisely so their message “count me in” would not be heard by the “people.”

If, for Derrida, there is a unity or link between poetry and philosophy, it lies in the imperative for translation, as I will attempt to translate South African poetry within a particular context. Only by using context to translate can Derrida's notion of justice be approached, with some caution as Derrida privileges justice above rights, as an appeal to conscience and the unconditional. In 1997 Derrida addressed the International Parliament of Writers.<sup>22</sup> This group introduced the notion of refuge<sup>23</sup> cities which would be open to all within states whose policies might not accept exiles as a “just repose.”<sup>24</sup> Mandela's first act of negotiation for a peaceful transition of power in South Africa was “based on the principle of a procedure of amnesty,” in

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<sup>21</sup> Barry Feinberg, ed., *Poets to the People: South African Freedom Poems*, Enlarged ed., African Writers Series (London: Heinemann, 1980).

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley, Michael Hughes, and with a preface by Simon Critchley and Richard Kearney. (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> City of Refugees (not refugees). This idea was introduced under Salmon Rushdie's presidency and was followed by a “Writers in Exile” residency.

<sup>24</sup> Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 23.

other words to “permit the return of the ANC exiles.”<sup>25</sup> For Derrida, this sense of justice belongs to the person Mandela himself and will never and could not be codified, not even within the frame of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Forgiveness means forgiving the unforgivable, vividly described in the poetry of the exiled poets. Derrida concludes that only a form of madness can forgive the unforgivable because the truly unforgivable cannot be forgiven, an “unconditional”<sup>26</sup> forgiveness which does not exude power, which does not come from state or sovereignty.

The ambiguity of hierarchies and the displacement of justice with violence finds a representative symbol not only in the figure of Mandela, but also the mythical Greek Prometheus whose fate, bound to a rock in apparent exile, appears in many South African exilic poems.<sup>27</sup> There is a link between poetry and politics in the figure of Prometheus. In his drama “Prometheus Unbound”<sup>28</sup> Shelley expresses his political hopes in a poetical form not fully understood by critics who have still not deciphered allusions which appear obscure and haphazard. Shelley was working out a philosophical approach to “the ideal” in which Prometheus becomes “a symbol of the true humanity to which each man should aspire.”<sup>29</sup> Let us return to Derrida's justice, one which is intrinsic to an individual detached from state regardless of the nature of legislation. Shelley also confronts a moral problem, of Prometheus unjustly accused. Dawson interprets Prometheus as succumbing to government (Jupiter) as man “chooses to be ruled because he is incapable of self-rule.”<sup>30</sup> Yet Jupiter falls, and a moral dimension takes precedence over a legal one. Like Derrida, Shelley negates the power of language by using negatives, what Derrida terms the natural language of “Perfectibility.”<sup>31</sup> Shelley too looks into a kind of madness, “Thrones, altars, judgement-seats, and prisons;”<sup>32</sup> as Prometheus gazes beyond the earth for freedom and encounters the “Spirit of the Hour” who sees only the “pinnacled dim

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>27</sup> For example David Evans, “African Prometheus,” in *Poets to the People*, ed. Barry Feinberg. Enlarged ed. (London: Heinemann, 1980), 12-14; Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali, “Handcuffs,” in *The Return of the Amasi Bird*, eds. Tim Couzens and Essop Patel (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982), 222-223.

<sup>28</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Prometheus Unbound,” in *The Major Works Including Poetry, Prose and Drama*, eds. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 229-313.

<sup>29</sup> Dawson, *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics*, 122.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>31</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1976), 17.

<sup>32</sup> Shelley, “Prometheus Unbound,” 293.

in the intense inane,”<sup>33</sup> a madness that deprives, thus requiring a madness to forgive. Williams has an extensive discussion of the Prometheus figure in Shelley’s poem in comparison to the Soweto poets.<sup>34</sup>

Dawson concludes that “the world of unconnected individuals would be no ideal world for Shelley.”<sup>35</sup> This is the world exiles can face although South African exiles were often bound together by a common cause. This presupposes that the cause is organised and that it privileges the exile in some way so that there can be a sense of the communal. It is this attempt to connect (or disconnect) that concerns Derrida too, how language and thought can bring about change. For Shelley, the “great instrument of moral good” is the “imagination”<sup>36</sup>; for Derrida (although he would not use these words, and I hesitate myself to use them in relation to Derrida) the moral good is justice. For Shelley the only way to create a just society is by following “reasoned principles of moral conduct.”<sup>37</sup> Derrida is not so prescriptive. He appeals or ingenuously disavows. Shelley’s belief in an ideal world appears in much South African poetry which looks forward to a world of “reasoned principles,” Derrida’s law rather than his justice? The symbol of Prometheus appears in David Evans’s poem “African Prometheus” where all South African freedom fighters are Prometheus-type figures “who endure” because the seeds of freedom have been sown, like Shelley’s “seeds cast upon the highway of life,”<sup>38</sup> here “But / smouldering in a sullen tree / a hut fire gleams / flares / disappears / Prometheus / endures.”<sup>39</sup>

Prometheus can endure with the knowledge that he has received a message, a protest, a gleam. What or who answers back to the exiled self?

Influenced by William Godwin, Shelley recognised the effect poetry could have on values and morality. Godwin saw poetry as a possibly influential medium for even “the poorest peasant in the remotest corner of England.”<sup>40</sup> Trilling believed that Shelley’s moral instruction was diluted in translation so that, unlike the meaning Derrida ascribes to translation, translation can hinder the emergence of the original meaning. Shelley’s legislator, translator, is the poet. Derrida’s justice lies beyond the state, and certainly in South Africa poets and novelists became

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 294.

<sup>34</sup> Williams, Merle A. “Shelley and the Soweto Poets: Projects of Resistance, Visions of Freedom.” *English Studies in Africa* 40 (1997): 77-87.

<sup>35</sup> Dawson, *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics*, 131.

<sup>36</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry,” in *The Major Works Including Poetry, Prose and Drama*, eds. Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 682.

<sup>37</sup> Shelley, “Prometheus Unbound,” Preface, 232.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Evans, “African Prometheus,” 14.

<sup>40</sup> William Godwin, “Of Choice in Reading,” in *The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners and Literature in a Series of Essays* (Edinburgh: John Anderson, 1923), 125.

the conscience, the keeper of the moral conscience, of South Africa as state. In her summary of Cixous's move towards an increasing politicisation of her poetry, MacGillivray comments that “wisdom can be sought too in the politics and poetry of the individual's strange and nightmarish relation to history.”<sup>41</sup> Both Cixous and Derrida, despite their differences, locate writing and language at the centre of understanding this relationship. Cixous's use of poetry in particular is to displace confessional political discourse by being part of another schema, namely literature.

MacGillivray's view is that politics is usually not deconstructed and cannot be deconstructed by identifying poetry as politics' other. Rather “poetry is not a substitute for politics or for life, but can it not be its handmaiden, or even its heroine?”<sup>42</sup> I disagree. In South Africa poetry often was the life lived itself. The two can encounter one another and amble or struggle together. Cixous' answer to her question “can a poet permit him-or herself, and does she have the strength to speak about that which has been reduced to silence?” is to write poetry to avoid silence, “silence that represses.”<sup>43</sup> This is such a familiar conceit for exilic poets as the poetic act requires strength, courage and hope. Conley (quoted in MacGillivray's edition of Cixous' *Manna: For the Mandelstams for the Mandelas*) speculated that:

Perhaps, the very key is that one is never 'home', but constantly exiled, wandering, looking for the key to paradise. The exiled poet hopes to find paradise through writing, but the key is in the writing and not in the recovery of a place.<sup>44</sup>

When the condition of living is dependent on the act of poetry this surely points towards unity of purpose.

Through my reading of poetry and fiction it often seems as if most writers are searching for a kind of paradise, creating an imaginary through the shape of words and the act of writing. Exiled writers have much in common with those writers who try to capture their lost childhood or youth, this belonging-to-the past or to childhood or to exile, not being able to let go even if the writer loathes their “childhood and all that remains of it.”<sup>45</sup> Sartre also wrote that the books of his childhood “were my birds and my nests, my pets, my stable and my country-side...they are the leaf-mould of my memory.”<sup>46</sup> Exilic writers use similar metaphors:

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<sup>41</sup> MacGillivray, “Introduction: The Political Is – (and the) Poetical,” in Cixous, *Manna: For the Mandelstams for the Mandelas*, xviii.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., xlix.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., li.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., lii.

<sup>45</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Words*, trans. Irene Clephane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 104.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid , 33-34.

Words I plant in this cool adversity  
germinate in April ardour, green  
fused push through sleep mist that has haunted  
the rich black soil of midnight in the brain.<sup>47</sup>

Writers have always been concerned with biography and autobiography; however in the last twenty years the apparent need to create or invent ever more theories now privilege biography particularly in order to address women's writing. Gender inequities have finally been given agency by publishers and readers. In South Africa women were an integral part of the liberation movement yet often remained as minority voices in print. Theories of biography examine how biography recreates past lives. Yet Henry James, for example, would write about the beginning of an idea for a story, how little notes became the source for an exploration of the freedom of the imagination, reality being fashioned by imagination. The act of writing is the art of giving form or structure to an imaginative recreation that has its source in human experience. Even poetry resulting from crisis includes the imaginative or transforms language imaginatively (Celan) to represent reality. The words on a protest banner march themselves from a voice or history or a room or a floor to our imaginations. James himself wrote that the novelist must “regard himself as an historian and his narrative as history.”<sup>48</sup> And so too, the poet.

Derrida echoes Sartre on subjectivity although Derrida does not have Sartre's certainty: “Man cannot pass beyond human subjectivity.”<sup>49</sup>

Paul Celan believed that there was “nothing in the world for which a poet will give up writing, not even when he is a Jew and the language of his poems is German”<sup>50</sup> and, (my addition) he is in exile. I have tried in a roundabout way to answer the question I posed: What is the connection between Jacques Derrida and South African politics and poetry under apartheid? It is a connection Derrida himself made through his active involvement in the anti-apartheid movement, but perhaps it is also his experience of exile and his moving of epistemology towards an understanding, never finally, of difference. By reading Derrida can we construe a trusted encounter with Shelley? That entrusted thus, we enter a possible praxis with a literary engagement that our exilic poets transformed into an altruistic, political intent.

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<sup>47</sup> Arthur Nortje, “Asseverations,” in *Dead Roots: Poems* (London: Heinemann, 1973), 152.

<sup>48</sup> Henry James, *The Future of the Novel: Essays on the Art of Fiction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 248.

<sup>49</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 1948), 29.

<sup>50</sup> John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 56.

## Forgiveness and Altruism

I have positioned this section within current dialogues on biopolitics, geo-cultural borders and questions of nationalism, identity and belonging. Although there has been a shift in emphasis post 9/11, these questions remain and have, if anything, strengthened in political debate. South African poetry and song in the twentieth-century was a specific interstice in South African cultural history which pounded away at the margins of dominating, but not dominant, discourses before, during and after stifling periods of censorship and repression but were part of the ideology of apartheid. As we have seen in South Africa there has always been a close relationship between writing and politics produced as part of a dialogic attempt to present/represent a semblance of truth about everyday life to the world outside South Africa. Particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, it was often seen as the duty of every writer to represent the struggle against apartheid and this issue itself created tensions between poetics and politics which are not yet completely resolved. Writers had to examine their role as producer and the agencies and reception available to them as well as confront questions of identity and belonging which permeated, and still feature in, everyday discourses within South African society. This section looks at issues of identity in relation to ubuntu and poetic humanism to see how the ideal of freedom delivered poetry to the people.

In 2002, *PMLA* (the journal of the Publications of the Modern Language Association of America) published an interview with, and responses to, Julia Kristeva who discussed forgiveness within the frame of Derrida's seminars on "pardon and repentance."<sup>51</sup> In her introduction to the Kristeva interview, Rice comments that "it is clear that the aims of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, for example, are in tandem with Kristeva's understanding of forgiveness."<sup>52</sup> Can you forgive a person but not their act? Or do you forgive the act, but not the person? Was it forgiveness that some South African writers found through the act of writing? And if so, of what or whom? In her response to Kristeva's interview, Gallagher,<sup>53</sup> who has also written a book<sup>54</sup> on this topic, discusses some of the literary texts which have been produced as a result of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission interviews, interpreting these as attempts to write new identities to cope with the trauma of the past. In other

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<sup>51</sup> Julia Kristeva and Alison Rice, "Forgiveness: An Interview," *PMLA* 117, no. 2 (March, 2002), 278.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>53</sup> Susan Vanzanten Gallagher, "I Want to Say: / Forgive Me': South African Discourse and Forgiveness," *PMLA* 117, no. 2 (Mar., 2002).

<sup>54</sup> ———, *Truth and Reconciliation: The Confessional Mode in South African Literature* (Heinemann, 2002).



words, the act of writing produces a therapeutic healing towards a recovered sense of self. Grunebaum reconsiders this theme: “reconciliation discourse also places very particular boundaries around what is spoken, written, remembered, represented, mourned and claimed.”<sup>55</sup> Those bearing witness are often those who suffered most and who now have the additional burden of forgiveness where “anger, trauma and poverty do not end.”<sup>56</sup> Many exilic writers faced this problem after apartheid when, together with the need to reintegrate into South Africa on their return from exile, these poets faced the question of forgiveness, and a concomitant expectation from some, that this also involved forgetting:

all of us  
before we become ancestors  
we wish them to live like us  
we only give them the address  
and hope  
they will not forget it  
lest they lose themselves  
they may not live it but they must not forget it.<sup>57</sup>

Serote’s address is to history as he contemplates a future where history has been dimmed. I would add that given this burden, the ability to provide such texts, to write poems which are at once conscious of present, past and future, is an altruistic gesture towards a hopeful, communal solidarity, a role sought by exilic poetry as it seeks to relate the private to the public with the hope that humanness will reassert itself.

It has taken Germany over sixty years to resolve issues associated with remembering the past. Within Holocaust studies, Felman and Laub examined the notion of trauma in everyday life as unresolved conflict arising from the Holocaust. Our frames of reference are often not imaginative enough, our “perception(s) of reality have often failed”<sup>58</sup> to stop or change events which happen outside our willingness to believe and acknowledge their existence in real life. Witness is thus not a witness. Some witnesses to atrocity can embrace recourse to the imaginary, for example by writing, thereby finding a way between the real and the unimaginable horror, while others cannot even imagine the atrocity they are witnessing. Felman points out that “to bear witness is to take responsibility for truth.”<sup>59</sup> We have seen how some literary theory can deny this process by arguing for relative truths. In a judicial sense memory removes the act of

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<sup>55</sup> Heidi Grunebaum, “Talking to Ourselves ‘among the Innocent Dead’: On Reconciliation, Forgiveness, and Mourning,” *PMLA* 117, no. 2 (March, 2002), 307.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>57</sup> Serote, *History Is the Home Address*, 24.

<sup>58</sup> Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), xv.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

testifying from a simple process of truth. In other words memory can be arguably unreliable and truth becomes a subjective reality. Yet we do not argue about the deaths. There is finality to a witnessed end to living unless religious or biopolitical beliefs or ideology persuade people that what was witnessed is not an end. There *should* be no conflict in accepting, within our theories, the truth of death. How the audience or body politic respond to representations of finality poses questions about our understanding of representation, genocide or depictions of apartheid. An appeal to an audience, as Derrida has pointed out, commits a narrator not only to oneself but to others “to take responsibility.”<sup>60</sup> Felman examines why a film like *Shoah* should resonate so strongly with an audience: “what does it mean that a story – or a history – cannot be told by someone else?”<sup>61</sup> The contested popularity of the film about South African protest songs *Amandla* also relies on testimonies and interviews with singers and songwriters while the popularity of the BBC series *Shaka Zulu* functions as a fictional narrative which becomes hotly disputed for its false imaginary. There is a relationship between the act of creating and the act of witnessing. Many of the recent examples of truth and reconciliation commissions confront these issues as pasts are reinterpreted to recreate histories.

The way in which Mandela has been valorised also adds to the symbolism he now embodies: a liberation fighter who was imprisoned for twenty-seven years, his role in a negotiated end to apartheid, however pragmatic, symbolically enacts, embodies, the very notion of forgiveness, of the (always) *possibility* of humanness. There is an almost joyful pull towards an undefined future in Derrida’s reflections on Mandela. Derrida was impressed by Mandela’s speech at his trial and wondered what would be an adequate homage to Mandela. He pondered the meaning of his thought: “admirable Mandela.”<sup>62</sup> Derrida examined Mandela’s speech before his imprisonment when Mandela conducted his own self-defence as both a lawyer and a person accused, interpreting the speech as being a tribute to a joining, what I have called a trusted encounter, a uniting of the audience with the spectator, an appeal to the audience, the reader, to “restitute the law for the future as if, finally, it had now taken place.”<sup>63</sup> Here it is the *Rights of Man* as first constituted that needs rescuing; in other words to ascribe to the present a reinscription of the past for the future: to think the future, to act the future. This was the encumbrance that South African exilic poets transformed into a defining sense of self.

Njabulo Ndebele, who has spoken of the internal exile of living in South Africa, was also in exile in several overseas countries and has been Vice-Chancellor of the University of

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Jacques Derrida and Mustapha Tlili, eds., *For Nelson Mandela* (New York: Seaver Books, 1987), 13.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 37.

Cape Town amongst other positions of high office in educational institutions in South Africa. In the 1990s, as an author both of fiction and essays and a past President of COSAW, he believed it was:

crucial at this point that the past be seen as a legitimate point of departure for talking about the challenges of the present and the future ... It is justice we most demand, not guilt. We must demand justice.<sup>64</sup> To neglect the past at this most crucial moment in our history is to postpone the future.<sup>65</sup>

Demanding justice is a recurring theme of our age. Rights theorists have long debated the issues of the natural rights of the Enlightenment. If we step outside this frame, let us accept Gilroy's challenge to rewrite rights talk with the background of oppression, slavery and colonial domination as the dominant discourse.<sup>66</sup> Demanding justice for apartheid becomes more than a truth and reconciliation commission, however important and vital this has been. It also requires an active understanding of history. Derrida contemplated this encounter between the past present, and the present. As the past moment can never be repeated but has been represented, we make sense of the past by examining this representation in a different present. For some South Africans who worked to transform South Africa during the 1990s only an opposition or expunging of the past was suitable. Others, such as Serote, dedicated themselves to the absolute necessity of creating memorials and testimonies to the past, another act of altruism.

In 2008, the South African poet Antjie Krog wrote of the need to translate the narratives of participants in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission so that people are:

set free from groping around with distorted tongues, unable to see, talk or hear one another ... Translation is essential for us to live in respect of each other. We have to translate each other to ourselves, to transform our behaviour into living a life acknowledging that to be human is to be vulnerable. And to be vulnerable is to be fully human.<sup>67</sup>

To be vulnerable is to be able to write of the problems of exile, the difficulty of return, the challenges of reconciliation, and of trying to understand "the lives of others."<sup>68</sup> To put aside one's own representations of the past, "Your cities of unequal rights / Your cities of violence and

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<sup>64</sup> Njabulo Ndebele, "Of Lions and Rabbits: Thoughts on Democracy and Reconciliation," *Pretexts* 8, no. 2 (1999), 155.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>66</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Darker Than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 56.

<sup>67</sup> Antjie Krog, "My Heart Is on My Tongue: The Untranslated Self in a Translated World," *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 53 (2008), 236.

<sup>68</sup> Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, "Leben Der Anderen/Lives of Others," (Culver City, CA: Verleih der Buena Vista International, 2007), a film about an East German Stasi spy.

intrigue / Your cities of human challenge,”<sup>69</sup> and to fashion a new poetic discourse for oneself as a writer presents new confrontations, often with the self.

While Krog is referring to the literal act of translation of a Bushman story and a Xhosa testimony, she also draws attention to psychological barriers to understanding which can prevent reconciliation and forgiveness. It is also in the testimony of South Africa’s literary past that we see the same gestures of hope and altruism which, at some level, informed the testimonies of participants in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

In post-apartheid South Africa, restitution and reconciliation emerged as major tropes in literary discourse although this has recently given way to a privileging of studies of violence in South Africa. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa created a heart-searching thread of analysis which now runs through much writing about the new South African literature. Recent academic English research within South Africa<sup>70</sup> examines the South African canon in terms of confessions, identities and transforming selves as well as migration and movement, our perennial subject. Reconciliation is also the subject of Ariel Dorfman’s recent Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture.<sup>71</sup>

In a persuasive argument Wilson questions the legitimacy of the moral narratives created by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Human rights discourses explore contradictions in a post-authoritarian reconstruction process where truth commission narratives can be constructed to play a vital role in recreating the past to address the question of “justice.” Wilson contends that: “popular memories of an authoritarian past are multiple, fluid, indeterminate and fragmentary so truth commissions play a vital role in freeing memory and institutionalizing a view of the past conflict.”<sup>72</sup> I believe the poems of exilic writers can offer the counterpoint to Wilson’s institutionalized narratives, both legitimate remembrances of things past. Albie Sachs met his would-be murderer and simply asked him “to reflect on the significance of what he had done..... Acknowledgment is different from knowledge. It requires an element of imagination.”<sup>73</sup> The imagination as an act of remembrance becomes a literary

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<sup>69</sup> Mafika Pascal Gwala, “Words to a Mother,” *Staffrider* 1, no. 2 (May/June, 1978), 4.

<sup>70</sup> “Identities in Transition in Southern Africa (2),” *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa* 15, no. 1 (2010).

<sup>71</sup> Ariel Dorfman, “Whose Memory? Whose Justice? A Meditation on How and When and If to Reconcile,” accessed September 29, 2010, [http://www.nelsonmandela.org/images/uploads/WHOSE\\_MEMORY\\_WHOSE\\_JUSTICE\\_final\\_version\\_july\\_2010\\_for\\_publication\\_purposes.pdf](http://www.nelsonmandela.org/images/uploads/WHOSE_MEMORY_WHOSE_JUSTICE_final_version_july_2010_for_publication_purposes.pdf).

<sup>72</sup> Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State*, 16.

<sup>73</sup> Mary Rose Liverani, “Albie Sachs and Restorative Justice: Let Us Say Grace,” *Law Society Journal* (February 1999), 48.

archive of the real. Speaking in Sydney and echoing Archbishop Desmond Tutu before him, Sachs articulated for his Australian audience the idea of ubuntu as forgiveness, that “There is a lot of power in forgiveness,”<sup>74</sup> placing the political idea of power next to a moral consideration of forgiveness. As a politician Sachs was able to use the language of both politics and poetry in his speech.

Wole Soyinka questions the validity of this trope of forgiveness for a decolonized Africa in his challenging, prescient and poetic treatise *The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness*.<sup>75</sup> Soyinka examines issues of reparation and retribution under long-term consideration by a UN Committee in relation to reparation for descendants of the African slave trade. The UN anti-racism conference in Durban in 2001<sup>76</sup> passed a resolution recognising slavery as a crime against humanity. That same year France proclaimed May 10 as a national day to honour the victims of slavery. According to Wilson<sup>77</sup>, there have been over seventeen Truth and Justice Commissions in various parts of the world as part of a recognized method for dealing with past crimes and addressing symbolically moral and legal wrongs. Soyinka muses whether forgiveness and reconciliation could compensate for the past: whether these moral imperatives expunge guilts for crimes against humanity.

Wilson points out that truth commissions are not present in Europe, where legal tribunals such as the International Court of Justice in The Hague are used to bring European war criminals to trial. War criminals are regarded as people who have offended against the law, in other words crimes are treated legally and not philosophically or morally as happens in truth commission methodology. The latter can be seen as symbolic gestures created to assist in the healing process after decolonization and the rewriting of the colonial past. So once more the idea of reparation shifts to one of justice and legislation: “And a justice is not served by punishing the accused before the establishment of guilt, neither is it served by discharging the guilty without evidence of mitigation or remorse.”<sup>78</sup>

As inscribed by the act of writing poetry throughout the twentieth-century in South African and other parts of Africa, the very notion of forgiveness is an altruistic one which could be read as a response and a gesture towards a utopian future.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness*.

<sup>76</sup> Mathieu Faupin, “The Long Road to Durban: The United Nations Role in Fighting Racism and Racial Discrimination,” *UN Chronicle: The Solidarity of Peoples* 44, no. 3 (September 1, 2007).

<sup>77</sup> Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State*.

<sup>78</sup> Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness*.

## Ubuntu and Poetic Humanism

In the rewriting of South Africa's cultural histories we can choose various centres of cultural representations or none at all; in other words, we can choose to see South Africa during the twentieth-century as producing the hybrid state of poetry which is now recognized in post-colonial discourse. Exilic poetry is one representation which can claim to have effected a moral and ethical transformation in South Africa. South African exilic poetry thus becomes part of what Anthony O'Brien has called "radical democracy,"<sup>79</sup> Soyinka the possibility of "harmonization . . . that elusive 'leaven' in the dough of humanity"<sup>80</sup> and Achebe or Mphahlele, humanism.<sup>81</sup> It is *the act or way* of searching for representations of humanism that denies the essentialism implied by the term as we travel towards an altruistic mode of thinking which finds representation in the exilic poetry discussed in the chapters which follow. Future research will excavate how poets represents the search for humanism in post-apartheid South Africa in a still schizophrenic culture of crime, masculine violence and disease straining against enclosures, affluence and democratic notions of human rights. How do we look below the surface of our skin?<sup>82</sup> How do we reconcile notions of ubuntu with violence?

For South Africans the moral and ethical stance sought as an essence is often called ubuntu or *umbuntu*. Archbishop Desmond Tutu has said:

Africans believe in something that is difficult to render in English. They call it umbuntu. It means -- the essence of being human. You know when it is there and when it is absent. It speaks about humanness, gentleness, hospitality, putting yourself out on behalf of others, being vulnerable. It embraces compassion and roughness. It recognizes that my humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.<sup>83</sup>

Another interpretation is that:

Umbuntu . . . is a Zulu word meaning community, family, unity. It's more than diversity.

Umbuntu is a teacher — it tells you everything. It opens you to feel, to see, need, to act. If you come to my house, a stranger in need, and I don't know you from Adam, I will welcome you and offer you water and rest in the shade. Umbuntu compensates for what you lack, and makes you feel a calmness within. It won't

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<sup>79</sup> O'Brien, *Against Normalization: Writing Radical Democracy in South Africa*.

<sup>80</sup> Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness*.

<sup>81</sup> Achebe, *Home and Exile*; Ezekiel Mphahlele, *The African Image*, New and revised edition ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1974).

<sup>82</sup> See Nuttall and Mbembe's incisive book on Johannesburg, Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe, eds., *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>83</sup> Desmond Tutu, *The Words of Desmond Tutu* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2007), 71.

keep you from hate, from rage, whenever you see injustice — but it will let you find it in your heart to forgive and be reconciled.<sup>84</sup>

Gaylard discusses ubuntu in relation to Western concepts of humanism and ubuntu in black fiction writing.<sup>85</sup> I agree with Gaylard's point that, taking a broad view, what were generally regarded as socialist ideals inform an African humanism. These ideals find parallels in other modernist movements. In his book *The Theory of African Literature*, Amutu proposes that the dialectical formed the basis of much African (I would include South African) literary criticism and philosophy. He argues that "the cornerstone of a dialectical theory of African literature is the need to historicize that literature"<sup>86</sup> It is instructive to examine the work being produced at WISER in Johannesburg which, by focusing very much on in-depth analysis of the current social environment in South Africa, also manages to produce a broad depth of understanding of the legacy of the past.

Gilroy and Appiah reject the notion of an African unity based on nationalism, Gilroy being wary of finding an essential project under which we generalize a way of thinking or being. Appiah has "insisted from the very beginning that the socio-historical situation of African writers generates a common set of problems"<sup>87</sup> which generally are those which situate Africa through the legacy of colonialism, primarily poverty. Ndebele puts forward a provocative and much debated question in South Africa: "Can Nelson Mandela have misled the poor?"<sup>88</sup> Although ubuntu privileges communalism above the individual, I am not proposing that ubuntu is necessarily a dominant factor for the poets and singers under discussion, nor am I accepting any split between the communal and the individual in my thesis. Exile can be both/or an intensely personal and frighteningly threatening, while publicly communal, experience. Gaylard argues that the communal aspect of ubuntu is the main difference between an Enlightenment concept of ubuntu and an African one. Others have seen in ubuntu a religious<sup>89</sup> overtone lacking in Western definitions of humanism.

It is generally accepted that the ANC assisted in the creation of alternative cultures in South Africa and actively took part in debates about national identity and social responsibility.

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<sup>84</sup> Pumla Mncayi, University of Alberta, accessed March 29, 2007, [http://www.humanities.ualberta.ca/southafrica/2002\\_03/in\\_their\\_own\\_voices.htm](http://www.humanities.ualberta.ca/southafrica/2002_03/in_their_own_voices.htm).

<sup>85</sup> Gaylard, "Welcome to the World of Our Humanity': (African) Humanism, *Ubuntu* and Black South African Writing,"

<sup>86</sup> Chidi Amuta, *The Theory of African Literature* (London: Institute for African Alternatives and Zed Books, 1989).

<sup>87</sup> Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, 130.

<sup>88</sup> Ndebele, "Suspect Reconciliation!"

<sup>89</sup> Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1997).

To this end (and beginning), as a movement with its leaders mainly in exile, the ANC prepared a cultural policy in anticipation of the demise of apartheid. This policy assumed a national unity of vision and was prescriptive in its intent: “In choosing as its slogan 'National Unity', the South African government has embraced an indigenous value, ubuntu, a Zulu word which means humanism or humanness.”<sup>90</sup>

The preamble of the Draft National Cultural Policy prepared in 1992 includes “identity” and “language” as concerns of the new policy. Culture is here defined as “the sum of the results of human endeavour.”<sup>91</sup> The preamble clearly defines the general view of culture amongst those in exile: “the culture of the majority of South Africans became one of resistance to colonialism and apartheid, which became a major instrument in the achievement of political democracy in our country.”<sup>92</sup>

Here the assumption is that South African culture developed as, and was informed by, resistance. There is no differentiation between culture and politics. Agency for this political struggle was placed in the hands of, amongst others, the poetry of exiles.

Ubuntu and altruism inform our view of South African cultural change with both tropes being philosophical notions or metaphors in which we can locate ideas of communal obligation and individual subjectivity that persist through modernism. Indeed, this metaphor proves useful in tracing a genealogy or archipelago of poetic humanism from Shelley:

Of liberty, the fellowship of man,  
Those duties which his heart of human love  
Shall urge him to perform instinctively<sup>93</sup>

through to Matthews:

Is freedom  
only theirs to  
have, I softly asked?  
is it not for every man  
to share and spread the need  
of brotherhood's common creed in our land?<sup>94</sup>

where the “I” is a guarded but strong presence speaking for the comrade: “to share and spread the need of brotherhood's common creed.”

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<sup>90</sup> Cheryl Renée Gooch, “Black Journalists in South Africa Are Treading New Paths,” *World Association for Christian Communication (WACC)* 1997, accessed June 30, 2010, <http://waccglobal.org/en/19974-cartoons-and-comic-art/913-Black-journalists-in-South-Africa-are-treading-new-paths---.html>.

<sup>91</sup> African National Congress Department of Arts and Culture, “ANC Draft National Cultural Policy,” accessed February 2, 2009, [http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Govern\\_Political/ANC\\_Cult.html](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Govern_Political/ANC_Cult.html).

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Queen Mab,” in *The Major Works* (2003), 43.

<sup>94</sup> James Matthews, “Prison Sequence 3,” in *The Return of the Amasi Bird*, eds. Tim Couzens and Essop Patel (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982), 321.



South African exilic poetry becomes an altruistic act foregrounded by symbols and metaphors which grow out of contradictory social forces. There are surprising parallels and influences in the twentieth-century with, for example, the avant-garde, surrealism and the American Black Arts movement which had an effect on the idea of Africa and on black South African writing in exile. These synergies will be discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters.

Exile spans the gap between writers, readers and the media or even the silent victims of biopolitics. Poetry engages in representations of the present by presenting a dialogue with the past not only in terms of representation but also in terms of morality, ethics and political engagement as urgent imperatives of a solidarity which thrusts the literature of exile into a wider social arena. This is so particularly in recent debates on refugees and asylum seekers. This return to ethics looks afresh at the equal role given to poetics and aesthetics in Aristotelian poetry, a role equal to that of philosophy. Aristotle can be said to have envisaged an altruistic role for poetics in society.

Poetry is one medium which travels easily: it can represent the moral artefacts of cultural memory and be transported, transfigured and translated across the globe by exiles themselves, the voices of deportation, banishment, travelling, speaking and appearing through time and space. Not simply fellow travellers, but messengers of history: “And we too were history” writes Dennis Brutus.<sup>95</sup> In the same way literary theorists travel through history, but that is a topic for another thesis.

The songsmiths, the troubadours, the protesters, the rebels, their songs fill my head today. The men and women who were called troublemakers, who could never hear their music on radio, who were kept at arms length from the men in starch at the record companies, all their music crowds into my head today. I feel the rhythm of their vindication, and finally their blank verse turns to poetry.<sup>96</sup>

These words were spoken by Arthur Goldstuck, a South African IT journalist, as he stood in a queue to vote in South Africa’s first democratic election held in 1994. Spinning through his mind were the words of the songs and poems written during the apartheid years. For Goldstuck, the *act* of the writers, their *writing* poetry, achieved some vindication in the form of democracy. The work of years, (not) “blanked” out by the ruling white hegemony, helped produce a poetry called democracy, a legal application of rights to all. Why do we toss around the phrase “poetic justice”? Originally poetical justice was used by Dryden in the seventeenth-century. The phrase is defined in the OED as “the ideal justice in distribution of rewards and

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<sup>95</sup> Dennis Brutus, “They Backed the Truck,” in *Seven South African Poets*, ed. Cosmo Pieterse (1971).

<sup>96</sup> André Brink, ed., *SA, 27 April 1994: An Authors' Diary = 'N Skrywersdagboek* (Pretoria: Queillierie, 1994), 44.

punishments supposed to befit a poem or other work of imagination.”<sup>97</sup> Poems become the symbol of an all-inclusive justice or movement towards rights when poetry as praxis has achieved change. Blanked verse, verse that the censors had tried to blank out, never blank verse, carried an altruistic message of hope.

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<sup>97</sup> Simpson, ed., *Oxford English Dictionary*. See Justice, n. entry 4.

## Chapter 4: Language in Exile: Between the Real and the Imagined

He opened his mouth, lit his pipe and started. "Phineas Gaboronoe Phetoe," reading from the mountainous file behind him.

"Molefe Pheto! I offer that name as it is my right name." I ventured to put the record straight from the beginning.

"Yourr [sic] alibis and aliaises! We know about them too."

I did not know what he meant by "them" as I had offered him only one name.

All my life, I had been registered through the various South African department offices as Phineas Gaboronoe Phetoe. Besides Gaborone (correctly spelt), Molefe is my ancestral name. I have been trying and fighting all the time to correct the misspellings and to eradicate the inhumanity of being nameless to no avail. But after he alleged that my correct names were aliases, I decided not to crack my head with what I considered an imbecile.

Molefe Pheto, *And Night Will Fall*

I would suggest that there might be a conference of Native and European women, where we could get to understand each others' point of view, each others' difficulties and problems, and where, actuated by the real spirit of love, we might find some basis on which we could work for the common good of Europeans and Bantu womanhood.

Charlotte Manye Maxeke, "Social Conditions among Bantu Women and Girls"

Hypothesis to be verified: all responsible witnessing engages a poetic experience of language.

Derrida, "Poetics and Politics of Witnessing"

This chapter examines the energetic synergy between literary debate and the act of writing in South Africa. I look at influences on the development of South African critical literary theory beginning with the role of intercultural exchange fostered by exiles. This is followed by an examination of the effect of the ANC and various twentieth-century South African governments on literary discourses.

Having accepted that there is a multitude of meanings of exile for those in exile, for South Africans in particular the separation or separateness from South Africa finds an ironic echo in the intention of apartheid. The language of apartheid *is* the language of exile: separate development, division, exile, to be dispossessed of land, banished to homelands, exiled from families, imprisoned, placed under house arrest, in solitude or in solitary confinement. Afrikaner nationalists struggled with their own sense of exile. They tried to shake off British imperialists and black Africans, and also tended to be anti-Semitic. They perceived this "outside world" as a threat to the establishment of a home for the Afrikaans people and set out to establish a laager and a language which would see them no longer in exile. The Afrikaners would be the possessor, masters of a pre-modern world. They coped with the clash between ideology and modernity by

retreating, making language the ultimate dissembler and ruler. Nationalism and exile, as Said has intimated, cannot be separated!<sup>1</sup>

### **The Ecstasy of Being Alive**

To understand the poetics of language that was once defined as on or in the margins of twentieth-century South Africa, it is necessary to negotiate first the contesting uses of language at what was its hegemonic centre. Language was a central weapon of control and power in South Africa where constructs of everyday life created by the language of dominant power groups formed a natural dialogic relationship with the language of poetics at the margin. Within this oppositional relationship, marginalized groups lived a life often depicted as absurd in the literary sense of the word. South African playwrights and cartoonists situated their characters in absurdist constructs to reveal the power of language apparently imbued with new significations. The paradox is obvious: the language of power/the power of language in South Africa was indeed a transforming and transfiguring process (in both a classic Marxist and a “Saidian” sense), that sustained both destruction and creation.

In his editorial to the book *Poets to the People*, Feinberg calls South Africa “poetry country.”<sup>2</sup> Is South Africa now a poem, a text, a metaphor? Ndebele’s text of social beings? South African poets and singers, exiled, had a job to do:

I must lug my battered body  
Garbage-littered  
Across the frontiers of the world,  
Recite my wear-shined clichés  
For nameless firesides  
And fidget, a supple suppliant, for papers  
In a thousand wooden ante-rooms;  
Wince, in the tense air of recognition  
As the clean-limbed, simple and innocent grow  
Hostile;  
-in my baggage I bear the ticking explosives  
of reproach, and threat, and challenge.<sup>3</sup>

This almost dirge-like poem, full of fatigue, belonged to Dennis Brutus an English teacher and poet who was arrested in South Africa, banned, shot, imprisoned, sentenced to hard labour on Robben Island and finally exiled again. In exile he spearheaded the campaign to remove South Africa from the Olympic Games and became a Professor of English at

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<sup>1</sup> Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, 173-186.

<sup>2</sup> Feinberg, ed., *Poets to the People: South African Freedom Poems*. Enlarged ed., xi.

<sup>3</sup> Dennis Brutus, “I Must Lug My Battered Body,” in *A Simple Lust: Selected Poems Including Sirens Knuckles Boots, Letters to Martha, Poems from Algiers, Thoughts Abroad* (London: Heinemann, 1973), 130.

Northwestern University in the US and then at Pennsylvania. He wrote the above poem in Epping, in Sydney's north.

What "story" *would* the nameless firesides and the clean-limbed, simple and innocent, hear?

In the 1980s as writing became more strident trying to be heard, it found a voice in the prosecutor who brought poems as evidence to be read out aloud at political trials. Jeremy Cronin demonstrates how "songs, chants, slogans, funeral orations, political speeches, sermons, graffiti, poems, banners, T-shirts, buttons, pamphlets and flyers"<sup>4</sup> were put on trial and were thus given an audience beyond the kitchens, rallies, halls, jails, funerals of their creators.

John Matshikiza writes:

And as I rise  
My king shall rise  
And Africa will come back.  
Today I have died.<sup>5</sup>

Here the "I" is inversely metonymic of "we." The "we" has been crucified like a Christ-image and when the "king," the moment of liberation arrives, Africa will be resurrected. Without Africa, the self has died.

In 1955 Adorno wrote: "After Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric,"<sup>6</sup> but later recanted in the *Negative Dialectics*:

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living...<sup>7</sup>

whether, or how, you can stay above ground in the very literal sense. This was the weariness Brutus was expressing in Sydney. You do go on living if you can live with the weight of responsibility, the anguish, the pain and often the residual fear or guilt of living.

For Walter Benjamin, Paul Celan, Primo Levi and others the answer was death, although the reasons for their suicides are far more complex than implied here. Paul Celan struggled to transform his second language, German, through poetry, to use the language of the oppressor in both a metaphysical and transformational struggle to find meaning after Auschwitz, the meaning of "home." The question of language as home is, as we have seen, a recurring trope in South African literary history.

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<sup>4</sup> Jeremy Cronin, "Even under the Rine of Terror'...Insurgent South African Poetry," *Research in African Literatures* 19 (1988), 12.

<sup>5</sup> John Matshikiza, "At the Dawn I Saw Africa," in *The Return of the Amasi Bird*, eds. Tim Couzens and Essop Patel (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982), 394.

<sup>6</sup> Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, quoted, 139.

<sup>7</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.A. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 362.

In an insightful analysis of Celan's "Shibboleth," Derrida writes: "a poem is en route from a place toward 'something open' ('an approachable you') and it makes its way 'across' time, 'it is now' timeless."<sup>8</sup>

For whom were South African exilic poetry and songs written? For a possible future? So that the past is undone in the future? In order to provide historical landmarks, dates, of South African colonization and political history? Or as altruistic gestures trusted to act upon and be acted upon?

A poem can remind the exile of a past, that which is stripped away and removed by the very act of exile. Without memory, without a record of the past, a narrative or a story, there can be no identity. J.M.Coetzee asks the rhetorical question whether, for example, deaths in detention are ultimately more important than their depiction in literature.<sup>9</sup> The issue of truth outside discourse is enormously pertinent but also enormously difficult for South Africans.

I come back to Couzens and Patel's description of their collection as a "story": Nkosi is particularly mocking of what he sees as the patronizing rhetoric of some postmodernist theorists' privileging of diverse "black voices."<sup>10</sup> Can we speak of South African poetry as a single epic? South African poets' selves traversed the boundaries of reality, language and being within the context of personal lives lived in direct relationship to a political discourse of hate, discrimination and prejudice enshrined in law, and a counter discourse of freedom and hope, exile, loss, displacement and longing. This is an altruistic hope which appears again in South Africa's contribution to the human rights discourse, in exilic poetry, in the South African Bill of Rights and in the testimonies of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

## **Encounters with Violence**

My unease with the post-colonial language of otherness and difference has led me to search for the language of a non-universal "humanist" hermeneutic of poetry. By retracing the narratives of South African poetry in the dark years of apartheid within an inevitable prepared script, the script of identity and difference and hence of apartheid, it becomes possible to elucidate the relationship/s between the lived life and literary theory so clearly emerging as a

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<sup>8</sup> Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 371.

<sup>9</sup> David Attwell, ed., *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> Nkosi, "Postmodernism and Black Writing in South Africa," 75.

crucial issue for the whole market of cultural studies, a challenge anticipated by the writings of Appiah,<sup>11</sup> Soyinka<sup>12</sup> and Mphahlele.<sup>13</sup>

I approach the discipline of culture studies as an irritant in the side of contemporary market forces while accepting E. San Juan Jr.'s<sup>14</sup> argument that cultural studies is part of a dominant ideology. While San Juan uses the nomenclature "western" ideology, I prefer to follow Appiah: "If there is a lesson in the broad shape of this circulation of cultures, it is surely that we are all already contaminated by each other..."<sup>15</sup>

If we accept this contamination, we can leave aside the term "cultural studies," which can be used to cover the study of any aspect of culture examined within an institution for academic purposes and return the words to a non-academic definition: examining the practice of culture in history and its role in shaping or interpreting history. To a certain degree economic forces give form and shape to the languages used in academia so that the urge to obfuscate and resist can be read into a simple binary mode of commodity and reification, action/reaction. This historical-materialist focus, in line with San Juan's argument, asks questions such as why do theories or movements develop at particular moments in history. If we accept the argument that literary value is simply a product of market forces, a commodity, and that post-colonial studies or cultural studies take the commodity at hand and fashion it into a saleable product, we are clearly taking a contextual view of the relationship of culture to a society and thus falling prey to an ideology that impels such an interpretation upon us. Why persist in such apparently futile pursuits if indeed some university environments are not conducive to the funding of the humanities or social sciences in general and work against the notion of cultural studies as interpreting or effecting cultural change? From other positions outside or inside theoretical posturing the poor remain poor. No amount of publicity or sales or the recent exploration of what is now packaged as "world cultures" changes the fact that globalization (see Li<sup>16</sup> too) is simply another form of capitalism, exploiting and locating markets for the benefit of the industrialized nations; in this line of reasoning cultural studies are as much part the problem as an informing discourse.

I return to Appiah: we need to examine how we as theorists, or our theories of "contemporary social, culture and economic life, relate to the actual practices that constitute that

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<sup>11</sup> Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*.

<sup>12</sup> Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness*.

<sup>13</sup> Mphahlele, *The African Image*.

<sup>14</sup> E. San Juan Jr., *Racism and Cultural Studies: Critiques of Multiculturalist Ideology and the Politics of Difference* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, 251.

<sup>16</sup> Li, "An Ethics of the Name: Rethinking Globalization," 195.

life.”<sup>17</sup> If we discover encounters between practice and theory we find a “third” way, a way out of the binary in that the actual relationship between, for example, politics and poetry constitutes a dialogue, an encounter between poetic theory and political practice. This third way is an altruistic position in which we can find poetry as a representation of what I have called trusted encounters, this reconciliation between theory and life.

I had considered discarding “in exile” from the subtitle of this thesis, musing that a term so loaded with meaning and baggage could colour the poets with the readers’ imagination. I hoped perhaps that “exile” would emerge from the poetry to challenge those preconceptions. The poets considered here did not define themselves in terms of “difference” voluntarily or to distinguish themselves as a commodity in the market-place. The practice and theory of poetry during the apartheid years was rather to define what it meant to live life. I retained the subtitle; exile in all its complexities as a lived reality existed and exists and is inseparable from the lives and poetry of the many people who write exile into the night. Unlike Appiah’s art objects sitting in museums bought by those who can afford them,<sup>18</sup> South African poets sought to be a part of the society from which they were exiled to draw attention to an issue, apartheid, not to draw attention to themselves as individuals or to their poetry as objects, but rather to create a cultural and political freedom. Appiah makes clear the persistent problem of some writers who struggle with their own metaphysical position of self-definition when the past defines their perception in terms not of “I” but as “we.” If we can concentrate on this encounter, connection, dialogue between poetics and the communal, we can see a way of freeing studies of culture from the yoke of the binary noose of “cultural studies.”

Appiah views the challenges set up by post-colonialisms/postmodernisms as a humanist concern, a humanism that “can be provisional, historically contingent, anti-essentialist (in other words, postmodern) and still be demanding.”<sup>19</sup> So the intention of such studies is a humanist one dictated perhaps by ongoing dissent in content, language and form. In later chapters I will examine what Appiah calls “this human impulse”<sup>20</sup> in South African poetry during the apartheid years to see how this poetry comments on itself, where it presents itself as reflective of a certain notion of exile, creating its own theory out of its own praxis.

Appiah urges that we disrupt the discourse of “racial” and tribal” difference as presented in our theoretical discourse by rejecting an agenda defined by race, that destructive and insidious

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<sup>17</sup> Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* 230.

<sup>18</sup> Appiah makes an important point that songs and writing cannot be commodified in the same manner as art objects.

<sup>19</sup> Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, 250.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.



weapon of division. The difficult double bind facing us is that if you write history since 1492, whatever side you write from, there is an encounter with race and other major “isms.” However there are cultural and literary ways of breaking a written nexus: examples of literary disruptions are embedded in our histories of literary change, as markers of the stormy transitions and breaks of languages or genres. Many would regard the publications of Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*<sup>21</sup> or Allen Ginsburg’s *Howl*<sup>22</sup> as two such moments. Appiah is asking for a theoretical disruption of “the discourse of racial”<sup>23</sup> differences, so that we do not continue to accept the scripts with which we unwittingly collude. Many South Africans were imprisoned for their lack of collusion, their involvement with culture providing an insight into how difficult anti-racist sentiment can be when the interpretation of language is legislatively defined. As I hope to show it was possible for some writers to use an ordinary language of “self,” the modernist concentration on “I” providing a defiant gesture when that “I” is legislatively non-existent.

In this way racism defined a generation of writers/artists in South Africa regardless of the content or form of the writing. This needs to be stated: the practice of apartheid embodied the definition of fascist ideology much as Nazism did so that the very attempt to stand outside the dominating languages of apartheid became a mode of production, albeit one which cut across racist divisions. The ANC was a multiracial political party. Throughout his personal career Nelson Mandela and others like him refused to use Afrikaans. Appiah quotes du Bois’ argument that racism had blocked the development of labour organizations in the States.<sup>24</sup> Depending on your mode of interpretation or privileging, in South Africa racism created or at least informed the development of labour organizations which went on to play a major role both in ending apartheid and in the production of poetry militating for this change.

Maria de Gennaro puts forward a similar argument: namely that Aimé Césaire rejected the “humanist rhetoric”<sup>25</sup> of the colonizers who make the distinction of “racial essentialism,” a label of difference Césaire tried to abandon. Nevertheless de Gennaro finds echoes of both romanticism and humanism in Césaire’s writings as he tries to locate a “shared humanity.”<sup>26</sup> This project was also Percy Bysshe Shelley’s as he encountered the legacy of the French Revolution

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<sup>21</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Return to My Native Land. / Cahier D’un Retour Au Pays Natal. With an Introduction by Mazisi Kunene*, trans. John Berger and Anna Bostock (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969).

<sup>22</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *Howl, and Other Poems. With an Introduction by William Carlos Williams* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1959).

<sup>23</sup> Appiah, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, 290.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Maria de Gennaro, “Fighting ‘Humanism’ on Its Own Terms,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 14, no. 1 (2003), 54.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 55.

and the disruptions caused by industrialization in nineteenth-century England. The dichotomy between ethical or psychological issues of “self” and the concept of Négritude assert themselves in Césaire’s writing as they do in Soyinka’s. De Gennaro’s analysis of Césaire’s writing reinforces the need to redefine or reject our understanding of humanism as based purely on Enlightenment discourse (see de Gennaro<sup>27</sup>) and we could ask why, at this stage of history, we are trying to define humanness (Lévinas’ word).<sup>28</sup> Humanity, humility or humaneness are all possibly markers of our humanisms. San Juan is still quoting Marx as an explanation. Are our attempts to define humanness a reaction to racism, violence or destructive economic forces, or a witness to the lack of change in the relationship between dominant industrialized nations/ideologies and the smaller nation states and their economic relations? De Gennaro depicts Appiah, Todorov and Said’s various positions as “resistance to cultural relativism as the subject of human suffering.”<sup>29</sup> Chris Abani calls this resistance “vat” “value added torture,”<sup>30</sup> values constructed in theory and bearing no relation to the reality of a lived life.

Paul Gilroy also attempts to subvert the notion of colour and difference by an appeal to humanness, what Gilroy calls “planetary humanism.”<sup>31</sup> Gilroy’s book *Against Race* arose out of a need to address the rise of nationalism in post-war Europe and the increasing emphasis on ethnic identity. He uses South Africa as an example of the demise of racism (but possibly not its legacy), an example of how a defined ideology can be overturned. Gilroy calls for a “new, less triumphalist humanism . . . based upon the narratives and practices of cultural intermixtures.”<sup>32</sup> This argument runs through much recent critical British writing where the notion of hybridity is rejected in favour of Ndebele’s celebration of the ordinary and the everyday.<sup>33</sup> Many exiles, as well as the ANC, rejected racial discourse, difficult as it was to avoid in practice. Keorapetse Kgotsile positions poetry in the forefront of social change but not on the basis only of race.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 73. Derrida quotes Lévinas: “To shelter the other in one own’s home or land, to tolerate the presence of the landless or homeless on the ‘ancestral’ soil, so jealously, so meanly loved – is that the criterion of humanness? Unquestionably so.”

<sup>29</sup> de Gennaro, “Fighting ‘Humanism’ on Its Own Terms,” 62.

<sup>30</sup> Chris Abani, “Resisting the Anomie: Exile and the Romantic Self,” in *Creativity in Exile*, ed. Michael Hanne (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi BV, 2004), 25.

<sup>31</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 29.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>33</sup> See for example Laura Moss, “The Politics of Everyday Hybridity: Zadie Smith’s White Teeth ” *Wasafari* 18, no. 39 (2003).

The exiled philosopher Frantz Fanon had called for a “new humanism” which would be “universal”<sup>34</sup> but also particular: “It is for my own time that I should live.”<sup>35</sup> Fanon rejected the idea of an Africa that would simply try to emulate Europe: “Humanity is waiting for something other from us than such an imitation, which would almost be an obscene caricature.”<sup>36</sup> Fanon’s books talk across time as powerful reminders of the distances his words have travelled. Reading Gilroy, Rose or Mphahlele we see the impact his small body of writing has had on numerous social and literary theorists and poets from all over the world. He privileges the nation-state with a currency and impact that read today powerfully critique the problems facing forming nations. Steve Biko was profoundly influenced by Fanon and we see how the cultural current turned<sup>37</sup> in South Africa with the rise of the mass democratic movement which gave agency to the worker poets, the Soweto poets and amongst other publications, the radical journal *Staffrider*.

Piniel Virir Shava is one of many theorists who wrote that “Black South African literature is a literature of protest.”<sup>38</sup> Now regarded either as simplistic and reductivist or as passé within South Africa, there is, however, a solid perspective within exilic theories which view this literature as resistance, black consciousness and Négritude being foremost expressions of protest. Homi K. Bhabha confirms the importance of Fanon as someone who could “describe the splitting of the colonial space of consciousness and society...articulating the problem of colonial cultural alienation in the psychoanalytic language of demand and desire.”<sup>39</sup>

The colonial subject’s other is a projection of self and is always interpreted in terms of the other. So in Fanon and Bhabha’s terms, an obsession with the other as alien intruder could be interpreted as an obsession with self-identity, homogeneity or globalisation, all discourses threatening concepts of nation, belonging and self, expressed differently, the exile within. Bhabha emphasises that: “the familiar space of the Other (in the process of identification) develops a graphic historical and cultural specificity in the splitting of the post-colonial or migrant subject.”<sup>40</sup> This is similar to Gilroy’s double consciousness. The exile is constantly alerted to a dual way of being and seeing.

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<sup>34</sup> Franz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 12-13.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>36</sup> ———, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin Books, 1967), 254.

<sup>37</sup> For further reading see Peter Horn, “When It Rains, It Rains: U.S. Black Consciousness and Lyric Poetry in South Africa,” in *Soweto Poetry: Literary Perspectives*, ed. Michael Chapman (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2007).

<sup>38</sup> Shava, *A People’s Voice: Black South African Writing in the Twentieth-century*, 1.

<sup>39</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 43.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

For Bhabha the challenge is to “see what is invisible,”<sup>41</sup> to see who is exiled beyond seeing or hearing. Bhabha’s metonymic moments invoke the exile moving between borders as a non-being, a non-identity and a witness. These negative declensions deny humanness, defined here as belonging or being part of a community or subsuming the self in favour of the communal.

Literary theory presents the binary of poetry and politics as a struggle. For example, Spivak laments the “epistemic undertaking here”<sup>42</sup> (a revision of Marx in relation to the global economy) and reaches the conclusion that the answers, for example the production of a new philosophy or ability to protect the intellectual property of indigenous rights, lie outside her lecture room and have “no place in an essay prepared for the impatience of publisher’s deadlines in the international book trade. Its place is outside my classroom here.”<sup>43</sup> We should not forget though that Spivak’s home town New York gave rise to the University in Exile, a home of sorts for Jewish refugees from Germany and Italy (it later became the New School and boasted Hannah Arendt and Max Wertheimer among a long list of illustrious staff), providing an intellectual refuge from the horrors of fascism. Keorapetse Kgositsile became a visiting professor at the New School long after exile and although du Bois and Derrida were both on the Faculty, South African exiles are missing from the names of New School academics during its formative years. The University of Robben Island was the South African equivalent.

In South Africa issues of academic relevance, the curriculum and literary theory inform our views of apartheid and post-apartheid educational institutions and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

I have reflected on international and heterochronic currents of thought which can be appropriated in different ways, hopefully to draw attention to the means by which poetry’s encounter with a political process creates those unexpected, and hence, provocative interstices of signification and meaning which stimulate so much literary research. The way we use language can iterate an idea generated from political discourse in one society into another so that the idea evolves into a different imaginary.

Perloff maintains that the avant-garde, interrupted by the Great War, continues in the new millennium as a late modernity, a “21<sup>st</sup> century modernism.”<sup>44</sup> This idea has gained popularity recently with many theorists regarding postmodernism as simply another phase of the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>42</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “From Haverstock Hill Flat to U.S. Classroom ” in *What’s Left of Theory*, eds. Judith Butler, John Guillory, and Kendall Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2000), 33.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>44</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *21st-Century Modernism: The “New” Poetics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002).

modernist period. To properly investigate late modernism in South African poetry would require another study comparing pre- and post-apartheid poetry, but in this thesis I will show that public – private dualism was also problematic in South African writing under apartheid. The poems studied here, these unsettling constellations, use language or writing as both an object and to express a personal subjectivity, language exiled from ordinariness to make what has been made appear ordinary, real and not imagined.

In their collection *Borders, Exiles and Diasporas*, Barkan and Shelton describe the post-modern world as “utterly heterogenous ... marked by fragmentation, mutilation and irreconcilable differences.”<sup>45</sup> Fragmented pasts/presents led to crises of being/nothingness in language after World War II and are also metaphors that appear in South African poetry: “Sweet mango tree. / I ache! I die! . . . / The door / Is shut! now and forever more!”<sup>46</sup>

In Benjamin’s juxtaposition of the terms “aura” (an inner life) and “shock”<sup>47</sup> (life as it is lived), he posits a separation between writing and experience. These are the spaces explored by Bhabha as well as by exilic or diasporic creative writers, the being “out of place”<sup>48</sup> (Said), the gap or distance between lived life and its representations. For Ndebele, this is the crucial issue: “what is being remembered actually happened.”<sup>49</sup> How can you represent the real? And what if the real is so horrific as to be unimaginable? This is the title of a book about literature in Chile under Pinochet, *Representing the unrepresentable*.<sup>50</sup> The spaces between the real and the imagined are examined in some detail by Felman and Laub. Felman, in her analysis of Camus’s *The Plague*, refers to “history as holocaust ... [which] proceeds from a failure to imagine.”<sup>51</sup> We are unable to see the unimaginable in front of us precisely because it is unimaginable. It therefore takes an act of fiction, a work of the imagination, to help us imagine the lived experience.

South African writing in the twentieth-century becomes a means of translating the real into the real for those unable to read the signs. This failure to imagine means that the

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<sup>45</sup> Elazar Barkan and Marie-Denise Shelton, eds., *Borders, Exiles, Diasporas* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>46</sup> H.I.E. Dhlomo, “Sweet Mango Tree.” in *The Return of the Amasi Bird*, eds. Tim Couzens and Essop Patel (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982), Stanza 8, 126.

<sup>47</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 149.

<sup>48</sup> Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, 139.

<sup>49</sup> Njabulo Ndebele, “Memory, Metaphor and the Triumph of Narrative,” in *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, eds. Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1988), 19.

<sup>50</sup> Yvonne S. Unnold, *Representing the Unrepresentable: Literature of Trauma under Pinochet in Chile*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

<sup>51</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, 135.

unimaginable, in terms of lived experience, remains unimagined and hence ignored. Only an imaginative recreation, in Felman's example *The Plague*, can prepare the "witness" for insight. Forgiveness and reconciliation can be said to appear in current literary and political exilic discourses to invoke a relationship between bearing witness and writing and reading. I argue that this relationship is altruistic in intent.

In 1981, Sadruddin Aga Khan presented a report to the UN entitled *Question of the Violation of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms in Any Part of the World, with Particular reference to Colonial and Other Dependent Territories. Study on Human Rights and Massive Exoduses*. The report starts with a poem, not by one of the colonized, but by Goethe:<sup>52</sup>

Grant one another room in this strange ground  
and share freely  
what you have, together,  
that you may meet  
with compassion ...  
See, the bonds of the world are loosed; what  
shall bind them together,  
Other than direst need, which on all sides  
clearly awaits us.

The report goes on to highlight the "push" and "pull" factors that create refugees, with special mention of southern Africa's minority régimes. Sadruddin Aga Khan, drawing a poem not from his family's cultural heritage nor from the people he was representing, was born and educated in Europe so his choice of Goethe is not surprising. He tried to unify Europe with the rest of the world and his work as High Commissioner for Refugees with the UN saw a huge expansion of refugee assistance programs over many dark episodes of recent turmoil.

In 2008 South Africa accepted more asylum-seekers than any country in the world.<sup>53</sup> This number of 300,000 is vastly higher than the estimated number of South African exiles who were assisted to return to South Africa after 1991 (by ANC estimates varying between 20,000 and 40,000). The presence of "foreigners" in South Africa is discussed in several essays in Nuttall and Mbembe's book.<sup>54</sup> Parts of suburbs in Johannesburg are variously nicknamed

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<sup>52</sup> Sadruddin Aga Khan, "Question of the Violation of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms in Any Part of the World, with Particular Reference to Colonial and Other Dependent Territories. Study on Human Rights and Massive Exoduses," (New York: United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 1981), 1.

<sup>53</sup> According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees as of January 2010, there were 47,974 refugees and 309,794 asylum seekers in South Africa. Of the latter, 171,700 were undecided as of end 2009. For more detail see: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "2010 UNHCR Country Operations Profile - South Africa," accessed February 11, 2010, <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e485aa6#>.

<sup>54</sup> Nuttall and Mbembe, eds., Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis.

Kinshasa or Little Lagos and they feel “just like home: except so excitedly foreign.”<sup>55</sup> Some of these suburbs are no-go areas for locals, the foreigners being labelled criminals for the catch-all gang activity some residents are thought to represent. As an urban landscape is re-represented the real infuses a familiar political ethos with new language and newer poets, though their message might be the same: “outspoken / I [sic] raise my voice / to break the bone of silence... / silence is not a place to hide the tide of violence.”<sup>56</sup> Exilic voices also contribute to the new South Africa with Mongane Wally Serote’s *History is the home address*:<sup>57</sup> “but baskets don’t come full if there is poverty.”<sup>58</sup> The historic dialogue between the South African and Nigerian literati has continued with, for example, the publication of the Nigerian (American) Tanure Ojaide’s poems<sup>59</sup> by the South African publisher Kwela (SnailPress). The enormous goodwill for poetry in South Africa derives from the poets, their publishers and we who read these poems as well as the space created by the exilic poets for social engagement.

That such engagement has also been a major site of contestation is, in a way, a tribute to the value accorded the contested notion of open social discourse within all levels of society. There was constant self-analysis and a self-referential environment in South Africa which created a discourse giving writing the status of the critic within. Many South African writers, poets, novelists, dramatists, academics and so on commented on the act of writing or being a writer in South Africa. This often meant taking a political stance while also being a creative artist. For example analysing the poetry and critical writing of Jeremy Cronin, Macaskill<sup>60</sup> argued that Cronin’s engagement with ideology is more forceful *in* his poetry (his lyric poetry) than in his writings *on* poetry and black literary engagement.

In this chapter I discuss two themes which seem to me to be important. I am interested in the encounter between academics and poets and the immediacy of intellectual comment which stimulates debate in the public arena. It is striking therefore that the number of women

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<sup>55</sup> Achal Prabhala, “Yeoville Confidential,” in Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis, eds. Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 316.

<sup>56</sup> Poem by Kgafela oa Magogodi quoted in Tlhalo Sam Raditlhalo, “‘Mo Faya’: On Recent South African Poetry,” Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, accessed June 28, 2010, <http://www.nmmu.ac.za/documents/TlhaloRaditlhalo/Tlhalo%20Sam%20Raditlhalo%20on%20mo%20faya.pdf>.

<sup>57</sup> Serote, *History Is the Home Address*.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>59</sup> Tanure Ojaide, *The Tale of the Harmattan* (Cape Town: Kwela Books/Snailpress, 2007).

<sup>60</sup> Brian Macaskill, “Inside Out: Jeremy Cronin’s Lyrical Politics,” in *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid and Democracy, 1970-1995*, eds. Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

contributors to these debates grew as the demise of apartheid neared and became prolific after apartheid. One contested view has been that Afrikaner and black women were both effectively cut off from mainstream poetry and politics during the apartheid years without a space in literary debate as well and hence were silenced. We find that in South Africa today there is no sense of shame in recognising how theoretical contributions can contribute to the creation of a critical discourse. In other words, despite the controversies surrounding the role of poetry in South Africa or debate about issues such as the financial recompense attached to the role of Poet Laureate, or indeed the questioning about the need for such a position, the debate happens! The second theme is the historical antecedent to my interest in the new romanticism, the altruistic intent of the exilic poets.

### **Debating South African Poetic History**

Certain names appear with predictable and reassuring consistency reading the literary debates about South Africa, by writers in and outside the country. The intellectual elite become familiar and the friendships and antipathies are often apparent in the dialogues and encounters these comrades have shared with one another over long periods of time. What is striking is how this debate has spilled over into the community so that Sitas can be both an agent for change in the Durban cultural community as well as within the academic community. He is a poet/sociologist who enters into the political and literary arenas as did Es'kia Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi, Njabulo Ndebele, André Brink and J.M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer and many others.

How to write and how to write South Africa's literary history has been the subject of much controversy. This was particular so around the standards/content debate during the repressive years of the 1970s and 1980s and again with the publication of Michael Chapman's *South African Literatures*.<sup>61</sup> Chapman based his study of these literatures around selected periods in South African history. Chapman himself characterized the controversy around his book as "arguments [which] involve the matter of identity politics, whose language, culture or story can be said to have authority in South Africa."<sup>62</sup> His book presented "a single though multi-vocal narrative based on principles of comparison and translation,"<sup>63</sup> viewing much of the literature in

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<sup>61</sup> Michael Chapman, *Southern African Literatures* (London: Longman, 1996).

<sup>62</sup> ———, "The Problem of Identity: South Africa, Storytelling, and Literary History," *New Literary History* 29, no. 1 (Winter 1998), 85.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*



South Africa as necessarily rhetoric, the result of “a conflictual history, in which politics have wanted to overwhelm the texts of art.”<sup>64</sup>

Chapman was criticized for his elevation of supposed minor writers to some kind of status in South African literary history. In *Stranger Shores, Essays 1986-199*,<sup>65</sup> (a title conveying the sense of an outsider or exile arriving on the shores of South Africa) J. M. Coetzee takes Chapman to task for his edition of the *African Poems of Thomas Pringle*,<sup>66</sup> particularly for his portrayal of the Scottish poet Thomas Pringle as a South African poet: “Their aim ... is to some extent to redress the balance of South African literary history in favour of historically particular writers of the liberal Left, like Pringle, as against mythically oriented writers of the Right, like Roy Campbell.”<sup>67</sup> A stranger arriving on the shores of South Africa’s poetic past reads with one eye on the page and the other immersed in memory.

Coetzee examines a Pringle poem showing its derivative nature in terms of a romantic European tradition and concludes that:

it is certainly possible, using all the textual sources available to us, to read back into the poem some of its historical fullness; but we must recognize that to read Pringle thus is to some extent to read him against the grain, counter to his poetic exertions. It is literally, to miss the poetry, indifferent poetry though it is.<sup>68</sup>

Coetzee is asking us to consider the poetic history of Pringle’s writing to form a value judgement on its poetic heart. Perhaps we could say the same of the romanticism in Adelaide Dube’s poetry. Maybe Coetzee was looking for a “purer” poetry much as Goldstuck did while musing about the resistance movement.<sup>69</sup> We could argue that we appropriate Pringle in the history of *this* debate, *because* of his “generalized landscape of the Romantic sublime”<sup>70</sup> by conjecturing that whites in South Africa of European descent have no tradition of literature in Africa, (as compared perhaps with white Afrikaners). If, as Coetzee speculates, Pringle should not be regarded as part of a genuine South African literature we would need to exclude our French Huguenot, Pierre Simond, with his African verse. Accepting this view would mean accepting that belonging to a country accompanies the exile as the only sure baggage or life support. We’ll explore this idea further through the thesis.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Stranger Shores: Essays, 1986-1999* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2001).

<sup>66</sup> Thomas Pringle, *African Poems of Thomas Pringle*, eds. Michael Chapman and Ernest Pereira (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1989).

<sup>67</sup> Coetzee, *Stranger Shores: Essays, 1986-1999*.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>69</sup> Brink, ed., *SA, 27 April 1994: An Authors' Diary = 'N Skrywersdagboek*, 44 and this thesis, 84.

<sup>70</sup> Coetzee, *Stranger Shores: Essays, 1986-1999*, 206.

This notion of community becomes important in South African poetry as well as in literary debate. Theorists want an audience and speak, not only to one another, but also to us, the readers. Both theory and poetry address notions of self, identity, politics, the sublime, landscape and relationships, commitment in relation to romanticism and modernity and historical or social engagement. Interestingly Coetzee's essays attempted to situate writers historically. In all his essays on Africa or African writers, he tries to define a South African identity by sifting through levels of historical influences to uncover what can be called "South African" in all its uniqueness. His essay on Breyten Breytenbach offers particular insights into the contradictions of being a left-wing Afrikaner who defines himself by his difference and separateness from all groups in South Africa but not his separation from the land of his birth, perhaps also a romantic tradition. The romantic notion of the exile is perhaps exemplified by Breytenbach, discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

But to take Chapman's approach further, there is a discourse in the history of South African criticism informed by the European romantic tradition and one that seems to have influenced the development of the South African lyric. This is discussed in Chapter 7 in relation to the poetry of Dennis Brutus. The *imbongi* lyric derives from a long oral tradition (discussed below) and was used by both the worker poets and the black literati to create a communal history. The lyric in South Africa developed from a mixed literary tradition which had its roots in black African history as well as in the early relationships developed with colonizers. Part of the British legacy was the Christian missionary and the establishment of mission schools which produced a particular brand of classical education. Some missionaries came into conflict with administrators as the former were ultimately more socially progressive. However, their teachings were rooted in European and North American traditions, the same traditions that gave rise to Pringle and Campbell, as well as H. I. E. Dhlomo, B. Walleth Vilakazi and Adelaide Dube.

In exile in Nigeria, Mphahlele appealed to the mother "God of Africa" who "will know her friends and persecutors" and hence will "civilize the world / and teach them the riddle of living and dying."<sup>71</sup> Hundreds of women were in exile outside South Africa, many of them writers. The role of women in propping up South Africa's economy during the apartheid years has been well documented, less so their role as poets (although Ingrid Jonker assumed an almost mythic status after her suicide, with many comparisons to Sylvia Plath). Every person in South Africa was in some way affected by a regimented demand for a tightly controlled labour force. The forced exiling of people from their children was one of the major social injustices that

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<sup>71</sup> Ezekiel Mphahlele, "Exile in Nigeria," in *The Return of the Amasi Bird*, eds. Tim Couzens and Essop Patel (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982), 174.

informed South African history. An anthology of women's poetry *Malibongwe* was compiled by women allied to the ANC in order to draw attention to the contribution of women in the liberation movement. Professional roles for black women in South Africa were confined to teaching or nursing but women had the opportunity to achieve high office within the ANC and often valued the opportunity to undertake much sought-after further education overseas. They were early feminists in that they represented and framed women's rights by acting as role models and as activists both within political movements and in the broader social arena.

Ruth Mompati was a teacher who joined the Teacher's Union and then the ANC obtaining work in Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela's law firm. In exile she travelled and worked throughout Africa, becoming the ANC's chief representative in the United Kingdom for several years.<sup>72</sup> For her the hardest part of exile was the lack of contact with her children after her applications for visas to re-enter the country of her birth were continually refused. After ten years her children crossed the border to meet her in Botswana.

Another feminist Mamphela Ramphele, a Black Consciousness activist and partner of Steve Biko, was banned while pregnant and faced internal banishment for many years. In the middle of her difficult pregnancy she learnt of Biko's death by torture while he was held in detention. Ramphele became the first black woman vice-chancellor of a South African university (the University of Cape Town) and a member of the board of the World Bank. Those women who went into exile because of their spouse's activist roles often faced a lonely period of adjustment which could only be partly offset by being part of a large communal group. For some women, exile presented endless opportunities which usually included some form of political activism.

Exiled poets and singers include Lindiwe Mabuza (who later became South Africa's High Commissioner to Britain), Baleka Kgotsitsile (South Africa's deputy speaker), Rebecca Matlou (the pseudonym of Sankie Nkondo-Mahanyele who was, until recently, South Africa's Minister of Housing), Ilva McKay and Christine Douts Qunta (who actually lived in exile in Australia and published *Hoyi Na! Azania: Poems of an African Struggle* in Surry Hills, Sydney in 1979), Miriam Makeba and Dolly Rathebe. Also in the long list of poets and singers were Dennis Brutus, Es'kia Mphahlele, Keorapetse Kgotsitsile, Mongane Wally Serote, Mandla Langa, Breyten Breytenbach, Hugh Masekela, dollar brand (Abdullah Ibrahim), Jeremy Cronin and Mazisi Kunene. It would be fair to say that most of these poets also had lively comment to make on the role of poetry in South African literary debates. Their voices reveal the heart of exile, their

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<sup>72</sup> Ruth Mompati and Hilda Bernstein, "Ruth Mompati, Lusaka 1990," in *The Rift* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994).

utopian dreams often rejected by the harsh dissection of academics in search of good, modernist poetry.

On December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1975 a book of poems was banned by the South African government. This was not an unusual occurrence as banning and censorship of both the written and spoken word were common under apartheid. This compilation was called *Poets to the People: South African Freedom Poems*, first published by George Allen & Unwin in 1974. All ten poets in this first edition had been or were in exile, in other words previously imprisoned in, or forced to leave, South Africa. In his introduction to the later Heinemann edition (1980) of the collection which added eleven more exiled poets, Barry Feinberg, also one of the poets, relates how the book was launched at a special concert in London. A reading of the poems and singing of South African freedom songs ended in both the audience and performers singing “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika.” This finale was common to many public gatherings in and out of South Africa.

Among the audience of South African exiles were major British actors and an audience attuned to and in tune with freedom songs, and with a growing understanding of the meaning of apartheid. The primary intention of this collection was to represent the struggle against apartheid through poetry. The appeal was to a world outside South Africa. While collections such as this carried a narrative of resistance to apartheid to small audiences in Europe and America, many of the poems in the collection had been written at diverse times in diverse spaces and by different poets, hence with different subjective frameworks. Is it not then possible to append the term “exilic condition” to these writers as the common thread in their anti-apartheid struggle? Words in these poems address war and terror, symbols, passion, loss, hunger, crisis, language... and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

Dennis Brutus’s poem “I am the exile”<sup>73</sup> dismisses popular conceptions of the exile:

the wanderer  
the troubadour  
(whatever they say) ...  
in my head  
behind my quiet eyes  
I hear the cries and sirens

The wanderer, the troubadour, early symbols of the “exile,” the minstrel choosing to sing his wandering way, bears no resemblance to the enforced exile of the South African who hears the “cries and sirens” of protest and violence. What these concepts do have in common is the need to write or sing to create representations of the “exilic” condition.

Addressing an Australian Law Society Conference in Sydney in 1998, Sachs referred to exiled South Africans returning to the country from all over the world, “all humanities”

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<sup>73</sup> Brutus, “I Am the Exile,” 137.

becoming part of a new South African culture.<sup>74</sup> He called for a new culture which could represent all individual experience as equally valid in order to transform the existing cultures of apartheid South Africa, cultural transformation within existing cultures being part of the broader effort to dismantle apartheid. Sachs took himself as a metaphor for this change. The survivor of a car bomb sent to kill him while in exile, it was only after the end of apartheid that he was able to look at his body, with one arm missing, as his own: “now that we are getting on with our lives, my body is my body and it belongs to me, it doesn’t belong to the struggle.”<sup>75</sup>

The body as symbol and object preoccupied the writing of many poets in this study. However it was not only the body that became disembodied by being exiled. Skin colour might have formed the basis for legislative injustices by the body politic with everyday life often defined in resistance to the surface, however thoughts and emotion were part of this disembodiment. The underground<sup>76</sup> is a useful and vivid metaphor for South African life but somehow I imagine an exile as always in flight, in shadows above ground. Ahmed Kathadra describes the absolute imperative to create a normal society on Robben Island, with all the ordinariness that de Certeau would recognise in his wanderer’s leisure hours, sport, talk, choirs, education, writing, space for reflection. Kathadra himself asked for books to be delivered in colourful wrapping paper so that he could create wallpaper for his cell, asserting a right to be above ground in the underground. In prison or in exile there was the constant struggle to reaffirm the body as belonging “to me.”

If exile represents a displacement, an exit, a shift across a metaphorical or real border, implicit in the concept are tropes of enforcement / coercion, belonging / home / return, difference / sameness / oneness, fragmentation / whole. Gready’s book<sup>77</sup> contains ruminations of exiles returning to South Africa. Many of these politicians, writers, artists, social scientists are transforming South Africa by writing a new South Africa. We try to focus on new identities and ways of representing these without the yoke or stigma of a racialized space but are bound up with historical signifiers, reinterpreting and rewriting histories by examining the interlocking threads of words, language, literature and song which weave through that history informing and transforming the present. Aspects of everyday life, for example the train or the body or the mines become powerful metaphors for reading representations of change.

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<sup>74</sup> Liverani, “Albie Sachs and Restorative Justice: Let Us Say Grace,” 48.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>76</sup> Nuttall and Mbembe, eds., *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*.

<sup>77</sup> Gready, *Writing as Resistance: Life Stories of Imprisonment, Exile and Homecoming from Apartheid South Africa*.

Of the thousands of collections of South African poetry published in a variety of languages and in magazines, newspapers, books and journals around the world, the writing of South African exiles informed the discourse of commitment. In the poetry of Dennis Brutus, for example, the poet tried to use language to express and create freedom, the content of the poem creating a form which could convey the message to a wide audience. For most writers South Africa was an ever-present reality represented in their poems, even as that reality slipped slowly and painfully away, propped up by its re-creation underground. For the exile, return, belonging, home are always shifting notions inscribed, often enshrined, in an archive and a memory. The novelist and literary critic André Brink, for example, spent several years in Paris and was there after Sharpeville in 1961 through to the student revolts in Paris in 1968. He expresses the encounter between his “exile” from South Africa and the act of writing as follows:

Returning to South Africa meant one thing: that writing had become an indispensable dimension in my life; and that I was prepared to assume full responsibility for every word I would write in future...There lies a peculiar satisfaction in countering the tactics of secrecy with exposure: the dark fears nothing from the light. This in itself is a justification for writing and for continuing to write.<sup>78</sup>

Without returning to South Africa, had South Africa remained only as a memory, Brink feared he would not have been able to write. Indeed, despite having his first novel banned by the censors, Brink remained one of the few writers whose voice continued to be heard by both the South African establishment and the fellow writers he tried to represent, his Afrikaner background ensuring his ambiguous status within the country.

Much exilic South African poetry challenges language and forms within images at once both symbolic and prosaic. What marks the poets is their originality and difference from one another and it is this very difference that evokes the notion of a South African avant-garde which appeared in fiction with the emergence of the group known as the “*sestigers*,”<sup>79</sup> and I would suggest, in poetry with the attempts at political and personal transformations embodied in, and emboldened by, the invention of new poetic modes.

Collections of South African poetry in English chart these transformations of both creative and critical practice.

In 1968, Penguin published *The Penguin Book of South African Verse*. Two well-known South African writers, Jack Cope and Uys Krige, edited the collection. They wrote: “Poetry is something of an obsession in South Africa”<sup>80</sup> and related this obsession to a “territory which for

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<sup>78</sup> André P. Brink, *Mapmakers: Writing in a State of Siege* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 35.

<sup>79</sup> The Afrikaans word for ‘sixty-ers’.

<sup>80</sup> Cope and Krige, eds., *The Penguin Book of South African Verse*, 15.

a variety of causes has always called from its often lonely inhabitants the response of song or verse-making.”<sup>81</sup> Their anthology is divided into an English section, translations into English of an Afrikaans section, and an African section. This latter is further divided into translations from “Bushmen,” “Hottentot,” Sotho, Xhosa and Zulu. Cope and Krige’s division of the literature reflected the assumed hegemony of the Nationalist Party which was intent on splitting up the population into linguistic and tribal groups but simultaneously resisted the apartheid agenda by translating all poems into English in order to reach a particular national and international poetry reading audience.

For Cope and Krige:

African poets still speak largely in collective and impersonal terms and songs may be found of true poetic values which are in fact group products composed by a wedding choir or a location musical band. The poem of total individualism or of alienation and despair is likely to come from the man who has strayed far from his people, perhaps into exile, and probably will be written in English, not his home language.<sup>82</sup>

Cope and Krige touch on recurring themes in the history of South African literary studies, namely that the desire for unity deprives black poets of a sense of individual creativity. As apartheid systematically set out to divide or separate South Africans racially, linguistically and ethnically, with cultural and social institutions informing apartheid, Cope and Krige should be acknowledged for trying to place on an equal footing the poetry written or recited in South Africa in different languages since the early days of South Africa’s cultural history. This is a referencing of South African poetry that attempted inclusiveness rather than selectivity, though inevitably the editors’ selectiveness mirrors the absences of the period, most of the exiled poets in particular.

In the second edition of an anthology entitled *A New Book of South African English Verse* published a few years after the Soweto riots in 1979, and just before the declaration of a State of Emergency in South Africa, Butler and Mann noted that “there was no longer the need to build presences” due to the “surge of English writing”<sup>83</sup> since the 1950s. They write that: “Those who believe that there is an immutable standard of correct English might think these poems are smudged with unacceptable variations. We make no apology for including them.”<sup>84</sup> Their collection is a chronological assortment of modernist South African poetry. In their terms, “unacceptable variations” start to make an official appearance.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>83</sup> Guy Butler and Chris Mann, eds., *A New Book of South African Verse in English* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1979), 13.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 15.

Three years after, another collection appeared: *The Return of the Amasi Bird: Black South African poetry 1891-1981* edited by Tim Couzens and Essop Patel. Of the 158 poets represented and all writing in English, only a handful also appear in Butler and Mann's one hundred poets.

Both books were published in South Africa and were thus limited to works they could legally publish. Both have a note about Dennis Brutus. After the Preface in Butler and Mann, this sentence appears: "We deeply regret that in spite of repeated requests the Minister of Justice has refused permission to print four poems by Dennis Brutus."<sup>85</sup> In the index the page number next to Dennis Brutus is blank. On page 397 of *The Return of the Amasi Bird* under the title of Brutus' well-known poem we find a note where a poem should be:

I am the exile: (Works by Dennis Brutus are banned in South Africa. This poem can be found in *Poets to the People: South African Freedom Poems*, edited by Barry Feinberg, Heinemann, London, 1980. )

Of course Feinberg's collection<sup>86</sup> published in London was banned in South Africa. For very different reasons to Cope and Krige, Feinberg finds poetry everywhere in South Africa:

Undoubtedly poetry and song are the most popular and accessible means of creative expression and communication in South Africa. Indeed, to the vast majority of South Africans, these art forms are the only means of expressing feelings about life under apartheid.<sup>87</sup>

In Feinberg's collection which represents exilic poets, we start to see the potential for language to transform the real into the imagined and hence back to the real again: Kumalo's "City of London profit man (A jingle for the overseas investors in Apartheid)"<sup>88</sup> plays with form to provoke an emotional response:

When infant dies of broken tummy  
ain't  
kiddies  
dying  
bloody  
funny?

In the preface to their collection of poems *The Heart in Exile*<sup>89</sup> published post-apartheid in 1996, de Kock and Tromp asked "why was the country at large, the intelligentsia, even tertiary teachers, so apparently impervious to South African poetry?" This statement appears to be born

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>86</sup> Feinberg, ed., *Poets to the People: South African Freedom Poems*. Enlarged ed.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>88</sup> A.N.C. Kumalo, "City of London Profit Man," in *Poets to the People*, ed. Barry Feinberg. Enlarged ed. (London: Heinemann, 1980), 57.

<sup>89</sup> Leon de Kock and Ian Tromp, eds., *The Heart in Exile: South African Poetry in English, 1990-1995* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), xv.



out by an interview with the writer Miriam Tlali<sup>90</sup> who recounts her search for books by her compatriots which were either banned or were simply not available in the libraries she was permitted to enter. However, we do know that there was something akin to an obsession among academics and the poets themselves to debate a poetic history<sup>91</sup> even though many of these same poets were in exile or their collections banned. Here we see a curious inversion: poetry is popular though not with the reading middle-class or the educators. By giving agency to poetry, the ANC delivered poetry to *both* the poets and the people. Poetry was no longer one of the silenced or exiled languages. Another collection, published in 1997 and edited by Denis Hirson, *The Lava of this Land* brings together the poetic canon, what Hirson calls “a loosely defined lineage of autochthonous South African written poetry.”<sup>92</sup> Here depicted belonging is informed by poetry, self and a country. Several exilic poets appear in this anthology.

### **Writing South African Literary Identities**

As discussed, literary debate in South Africa and indeed in other parts of Africa centred on issues of language, ideology, colonization and western perception or interpretation of literature. The philosophy of Négritude dominated the poetry and criticism of many writers in French-speaking Africa and elsewhere while, as we have seen, for others (such as Mphahlele) there was uneasy wariness with these debates especially with the sentiment and the elegance of some of the writers embracing Négritude. In South Africa discussion about literature in the vernacular or in English mirrored arguments in 1950s and 1960s Nigeria and Ghana and later gave way to lively popular and scholarly dialogues about whether the “true” representation of South Africa in literature was oral or written. Many of the writers who contributed to South African literary debates were exiled from their countries of birth, presenting a critical dislocation for those involved in literary production or teaching in countries where different currents of critical approach were dominant. What these vigorous African literary debates confirm is that written or oral literature and its relationship to politics informed many domains of public life and created vibrant and abundant African schools of literary criticism.

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<sup>90</sup> Miriam Tlali, “In Search of Books,” in *Soweto Poetry: Literary Perspectives*, ed. Michael Chapman (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2007), 44-45.

<sup>91</sup> M.J. Daymond, J.U. Jacobs, and Margaret Lenta, eds., *Momentum: On Recent South African Writing* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1984); Duncan Brown and Bruno van Dyk, eds., *Exchanges: South African Writing in Transition* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1991). This was particularly the case in South Africa.

<sup>92</sup> Denis Hirson, ed., *The Lava of This Land* (Evanston, Illinois: Triquarterly Books; Northwestern University Press, 1997).

Examining this debate in his paper “Traditions of Poetry in Natal,”<sup>93</sup> the poet and sociologist Ari Sitas recalls that two traditions, written and spoken poetry, stood in apparent opposition to one another in 1970s poetry and criticism in South Africa when poetry became visible in the media and abroad as part of the struggle against apartheid. Working-class or trade union poets could confidently mock the “colonialist” voice of comrades which seemed to speak through the written, published poets. Alfred Qabula, who had no formal education, rose to prominence through the trade union movement in the tradition of the *imbongi*, the praise poets, whose oral voices carried through from praise of royal chiefs, their original role, to the praise of people struggling for their freedom. Sitas describes the “educated” poets as communicators “trapped in print,”<sup>94</sup> writing for an audience who could not read or write and often had no knowledge of their compatriots’ work. Yet both groups owed much to the encouragement of the ANC who promoted and gave agency to all kinds of cultural expression within large sectors of South African society.

As noted previously, some black poetry in South Africa was included in *The Penguin Book of South African Verse*. In their introduction,<sup>95</sup> Cope and Krige note first and foremost the oral tradition which moved through Africa, as well as the written, romantic tradition imported to the colony by the Scots Thomas Pringle who was an abolitionist and friend of Coleridge, (Coleridge himself did not leave for either Africa or America in spite of his early utopian ideals).

Cope and Krige’s earliest English poet is Roy Campbell writing in the twentieth-century, while their earliest “African” poet is an 1855 Bushman transcription by William Bleek. Although born in South Africa, Roy Campbell was educated at Oxford and left South Africa for most of his adult life, yet a century later takes pride of place as the opening poet of the anthology. An extract from the poem “Rounding the Cape” depicts Campbell’s first thoughts on South Africa:

“The prow glides smoothly on through seas quiescent: / But where the last point sinks into the deep, / The land lies dark beneath the rising crescent, / And night, the Negro, murmurs in his sleep.”<sup>96</sup>

Campbell wrote these sentiments just about ten years after this same poetic tone can be found in the poetry of Adelaide Charles Dube whose 1913 poem *Africa: My Native Land*<sup>97</sup> was the first poem published in South Africa by a black South African woman. Dube described:

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<sup>93</sup> Ari Sitas, “Traditions of Poetry in Natal,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 16, no. 2 Special Issue: Performance and Popular Culture (1990).

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.

<sup>95</sup> Cope and Krige, eds., *The Penguin Book of South African Verse*, 15.

<sup>96</sup> Roy Campbell, “Rounding the Cape,” in *The Penguin Book of South African Verse*, eds. Jack Cope and Uys Krige (London: Penguin Books, 1968), 26.

How beautiful are thy hills and thy dales!  
I love thy atmosphere so sweet,  
Thy trees adorn the landscape rough and steep  
No other country in the whole world  
Could with thee compare.

And in the same poem a different sentiment:

Despair of thee I never, never will,  
Struggle I must for freedom-God's great gift-  
Till every drop within my veins  
Shall dry upon my troubled bones, oh  
Thou Dearest Native Land!

The British brought to South Africa a system of law, religion and trade alien to both black and white inhabitants of the country. Their arrival assisted the Dutch in their identification with the land but also helped define the future of race relations in the country. Crais' thesis is that the relationships which developed in everyday life embedded a "resistance scarcely equalled in the history of colonial Africa."<sup>98</sup> He contends that it was really the poor who developed this culture of resistance and hints at the role of the trade union movement COSATU in ending apartheid. This approach has implications for a study of the poetry in South Africa which, I have argued, was not a marginalized literary form in South African literary history despite attempts by some theorists to marginalize a resistance poetry which quite substantially, informed political change.

Every country has literary landmarks. By 1815 Zulu praise poetry was being published. By 1820 the first translation of the Bible into Xhosa began. The hymn "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" was composed in 1899 and the first African-run newspaper, written in Zulu, was founded in 1903. We seem to need to date, to periodize (contrary to expectation), as a juxtaposition to the American-Anglo-European written history which dated a canon so influential to many of our exilic poets both during their schooling and also in their subsequent encounters in exile. There was thus a development of *writing* separate identities in South African history which nevertheless developed out of growing power and economic relationships. This is reflected in the literary history too.

Dhlomo and Vilakazi engaged in a well-documented debate about the future of Zulu poetry with Vilakazi emphasizing a romantic approach to rhyme in Zulu, while Dhlomo was more concerned with rhythm and literary drama and writing in English on Zulu history. Attwell describes this difference as a "public discussion about the social role of literature among black

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<sup>97</sup> Dube, "Africa My Native Land."

<sup>98</sup> Clifton C. Crais, *White Supremacy and Black Resistance in Pre-Industrial South Africa: The Making of the Colonial Order in the Eastern Cape, 1770-1865*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 220.

South Africans,”<sup>99</sup> seeing the Dhlomo/Vilakazi debate as a struggle between modernizing tradition (Vilakazi) and traditionalizing modernity (Dhlomo). Kunene was to position himself with Bhabha’s third way, to ascribe a path for himself between both traditions.

### **Language in Exile**

As we have noted, South African literature developed in many languages and administrators embarked on a series of measures to institutionalize dominant cultures through legislating about the use of language.

In 1879, the vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town championed English and the English race and European standards<sup>100</sup> as dominant roles for education. Language was part of a struggle for the legitimization of cultural dominance. The forerunner to the University of Cape Town, the South African College, was established in 1829 while the first Afrikaans University was constituted in 1866 (University of Stellenbosch). The University of Cape Town was officially formed in 1873 and the “First Language Movement” for the promotion of Afrikaans made its appearance two years later in 1875. Ohlange, the first educational institution to be run by black South Africans opened in 1901, however by 1925 Afrikaans became an official South African language together with English. Literature had already been written and published in Sotho, Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans and English. Cultural competition led to a rich literary output and so writing became an assertion of rights and a claim to the history of the country and a connection with the land.

By the seventies, protest poetry was widely recognised and the term “resistance poetry” used more frequently. Sitas defines published black protest poetry as “a peculiar event in and through language: it is an imagined oral language,”<sup>101</sup> an event which attempts “to orate through language.”<sup>102</sup> I agree with Sitas and in Chapters 7 and 8 advance this thesis by pointing to the performative intent of the altruistic encounter of poet with reader or potential audience. Inherent in this idea is Derrida’s notion of writing becoming, a beginning with no defined end, the river of words, “talking” or “speaking” imagined in and as writing. That these two traditions, namely written and spoken poetry, became part of a common social purpose in the 1970s compels us,

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<sup>99</sup> David Attwell, “Modernizing Tradition/Traditionalizing Modernity: Reflections on the Dhlomo-Vilakazi Dispute,” *Research in African Literatures* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2002), 97.

<sup>100</sup> Chapman, *Southern African Literatures*, 446. Chapman’s timeline includes Dr. Langham Dale’s thrust to retain the status of whites through the “European standard” while the “degraded savage” of Africa was to be raised up this standard.

<sup>101</sup> Sitas, “Traditions of Poetry in Natal,” 317.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

according to Sitas, to examine sociological determinants of literature as well as the way these are realised: “the reasons why this complex of principles have [sic] predominated demands a sociological answer, but the way these are articulated as events in language, demands aesthetic argument.”<sup>103</sup> It seems to me unavoidable but to approach the literary past from a range of perspectives.

Much has been written about South African historiography and the interpretations of South Africa’s past. For example in his book *The Making of Modern South Africa*, Nigel Worden summarized these historical approaches<sup>104</sup> as firstly those told from a white perspective, secondly mid-twentieth-century interpretations based on the problems of two divergent economies, thirdly histories of the development of racism and then finally the development of “African history as a sub-discipline in its own right.”<sup>105</sup> The 1970s were dominated by Marxist interpretations of apartheid which concentrated on class rather than race. The peasant underclass was seen as a product of the dominant, industrial capitalist system rather than of racist ideology. For Worden, writing in 1994 at the time of South Africa’s first democratic elections, “the central theme of the link between racial domination and capitalist growth in the early twentieth-century remains unchallenged.”<sup>106</sup> However many analyses of the ANC discuss how democracy was created or fashioned with these capitalist interests firmly in mind. R.W. Johnson introduced his book by stating that “South African history has itself always been a site of political struggle” as well as “a vast social science experiment. A theatre in which much of the world finds echoes of its own struggles,”<sup>107</sup> but where people usually discover a very different country to that depicted in books or newspapers: “A friend who often visits Australia always says on his return that Australia is a fine country but, after South Africa, a little bland. It is, he says, a relief to get back to abnormality.”<sup>108</sup>

While Hendrik Verwoerd, “father of apartheid,” might have used his social scientist background as a passage into his policy of separate development, it could be seen as pointlessly patronising to categorise the (ab)normal lives of South Africans as “a vast social experiment.” What Johnson alluded to though is, once more, the difference between the written, the spoken, the imagined and the real.

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<sup>103</sup> Sitas, “Traditions of Poetry in Natal,” 326.

<sup>104</sup> Nigel Worden, *The Making of Modern South Africa: Conquest, Segregation, and Apartheid* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 2.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>107</sup> R.W. Johnson, *South Africa: The First Man, the Last Nation* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2004), Preface.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

This sentiment of abnormality is one that finds its voice in the South African exilic poets who often wrote *because* of the absurdity of the discrimination faced on a daily basis using language developed from a tradition that put in place the seeds of this abnormality:

I do not know where I have been  
But Brother  
I know I am coming.<sup>109</sup>

Sitas argues that the oral tradition, being part of an unwritten canon which survived to break the dominance of what essentially were British and Afrikaner literary traditions, is the one which steps out of this abnormality. Derrida would acknowledge this tradition as a just one that “keeps watch on that which is not, on that which is not yet, and on the chance of still remembering some faithful day.”<sup>110</sup>

Crais challenges historians to examine cultural representations which depict the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized as a method of interpreting South Africa’s past: “a genealogy of the production and reproduction of representation.”<sup>111</sup> Notions of culture in South Africa have been linked to education and politics by most South African governments from Governor George Grey in the 1850s to Thabo Mbeki in 2007. Part of this genealogy is to examine the link between educational policy and practices and the production of poetry or literature in general or an oral tradition in South Africa. Other writers<sup>112</sup> have taken a similar approach with Afrikaner poetry (i.e. written in the Afrikaans language) to show how Afrikaans poetry boosted the cause of Afrikaner governments and was used as a tool for their nationalist ideals. Further study based on Derrida’s writing might elaborate on studies which show how the formation of apartheid is represented in the world of aesthetics and language.

Interestingly, early proponents of Afrikaans tried to show how the development of Dutch into Afrikaans had parallels in European history. In a lecture delivered at Oxford in February 1936 T. J. Haarhoff<sup>113</sup> proposed: “that old English dropped its inflectional endings when it developed into Middle and into Modern English is well known; but it is not always realized that precisely the same philological laws operated there, as in the passage of Dutch into Afrikaans.”<sup>114</sup> Prof. Haarhof triumphantly announces that “Afrikaans [is] the language of the

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<sup>109</sup> Mongane Wally Serote, “Hell, Well, Heaven,” in *Poets to the People*, ed. Barry Feinberg. Enlarged ed. (London: Heinemann, 1980), 166.

<sup>110</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Racism's Last Word,” *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (Autumn 1985), 299.

<sup>111</sup> Clifton C. Crais, “The Vacant Land: The Mythology of British Expansion in the Eastern Cape, South Africa,” *Journal of Social History* 25, no. 2 (1991), 268.

<sup>112</sup> Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom*.

<sup>113</sup> T. J. Haarhoff, *Afrikaans, Its Origin and Development: Lectures Delivered before the University of Oxford on the 19th and 20th February 1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936).

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

soil,” a dramatic way of describing the natural evolution of a language in a new land. He also dismissed theories which looked at the Malay influence on Afrikaans, “there are not more than 120 words, and those mostly kitchen-terms [which] can be traced with certainty to a Malay-Portuguese origin.”<sup>115</sup> It must be remembered that Haarhof delivered this lecture to a British academic audience only eleven years after Afrikaans had become an official language and he was really appealing to the English to recognize Afrikaans as an equal player in South African history. He was at pains to claim a key role for Afrikaans in “cooperation between the white races”<sup>116</sup> as he was “not concerned with the Bantu relationship, in which, despite appearances, progress is being made.”<sup>117</sup> This small text bears closer analysis in relation to other South African writing on language at the same time as well as representations of self and community namely the influence of canonical English studies on representations of self and South African society.

In 1989, the Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa arranged a meeting between Afrikaans writers, South African cultural workers and exiled writers and activists to discuss the role of literature in South Africa in addition to the country’s political and cultural identity and to meet with representatives of the ANC.<sup>118</sup> At this stage in South Africa the so-called Mass Democratic Movement had very broad popular support through hundreds of grassroots organizations. The Freedom Charter was an ever-present backdrop to discussions of South Africa’s political future as was the need to liberate South Africa’s existing constitution (15). In a discussion of the role of violence in the ANC strategy for political change, Edwin Mabitze drew attention to the UN Charter (supporting violence against oppression). Steve Tshwete, speaking for the Mass Democratic Movement, defined the role of writers as “one of active involvement” (18).

What is apparent from the debate and papers given at the conference is the acute consciousness all writers had of their designated labels as assigned to them by the apartheid enclosure. Underlying all their discussions was a search for commonality across cultural borders. Reading the papers twenty years later, the urgency and passion of the speakers gives weight to Bilgrami’s<sup>119</sup> assessment of Said’s last work *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* that the critical thrust of humanisms can serve as a history of language while at the same time producing

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 66

<sup>118</sup> Ampie Coetzee and James Polley, eds., *Crossing Borders: Writers Meet the ANC* (Johannesburg: Taurus, 1990). Further citations of this work are given in the text.

<sup>119</sup> Bilgrami, Akeel. “Foreword,” in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, Edward W. Said (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

what Said calls a “resistance” to the culture behind these words. We see this resistance in exilic poets everywhere who migrate towards trusted encounters outside the comfortable cultural confines of their history. We find instances of this transculturation in all the poets considered in this thesis.

Conference members directly confronted the problems of how to include the Afrikaans language and Afrikaners in a new South Africa with Serote concluding that the simple aim of making the world a “liveable place” (94) would define the “freedom of people” (94). Speakers made clear that what they objected to with Afrikaners or the Afrikaans language was their “inhuman face” (39). If “Afrikaans becomes humanised, here is no opposition to Afrikaans” (Kgositsile, 38).

The conference was a chance for women poets to reach a broader audience than the sorority of writers to which they belonged. Language and ideology could be discussed in a frank and cathartic way. For Ampie Coetzee the Afrikaans writer had “become trapped in ideology, the ideology of capitalism, the ideology of apartheid...and the ideology of the literary canon and formalist aesthetics,” (48) subsumed by “the text and not with reality” (49). For many Afrikaans writers there was a consciousness of their privileged position as academics. Etienne van Heerden questioned how the Afrikaner writer “trapped in his own hegemony” (54) could reach his intended audience without using mechanisms of oppression. This was also Said’s preoccupation. Afrikaans writers had been given a far greater degree of freedom than all other language groups in the country and it was a freedom that some faced with guilt. Marius Schoon expressed this dilemma in a paper entitled “The Afrikaans exile and Afrikaans literature” (56) as he felt readers often had problems understanding the angst inherent in this literature. Essop Pahad concluded that the Afrikaans language itself needed to posit “essentially a humanist position” (73). We also see writers beginning to question the social, oral and performative tradition of South African poetry and move towards an element of introspection which is reflected in some post-apartheid poetry.

We have seen that the specificities of South Africa’s literary history fall between the real and the imagined, a space in which exilic poets and singers wrote a new culture. Given robust literary debates in twentieth-century South Africa and the legacy of apartheid, it is perhaps not surprising that the beginning of this twenty-first century has continued discussions of earlier theories which attempted to redress western bias. A recent reviewer despairing of yet another writer deconstructing the terms “post-colonial” and “culture” in the context of South African literary theory surmised that:



Such provisos have become so standard that they should probably just be printed on the title page of every book of literary criticism, below the copyright notices. Surely we can take it for granted by now that any but the most naive of readers is going to be aware of the provisional nature of any definition of literary-critical concepts?<sup>120</sup>

Yes, however we must acknowledge that this truism is a result of a complex and long literary culture which privileged the role of language as an expression of the political and social history of South Africa. We know literature, or poetics, started long before the arrival of colonial settlers to South Africa and that debates, conversations, arguments, discussions, papers about the use of imported concepts in literature in Africa were already visible with the arrival of these motley boatloads of people from abroad, and have not yet ceased. These debates were sometimes dualistic in nature and often confirmed the status quo. Yet the result was mostly vibrant and passionate: a broad communal introspection which gave rise to poetry that expressed an urgent and assertive South African literary culture. Chapter 5 addresses some aspects of literary production in South Africa.

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<sup>120</sup> Thomas Jeffrey, "Review of *South Africa, Shakespeare, and Post-Colonial Culture* by Natasha Distiller," *NELM News* 47 (November 2007), 12.

## Chapter 5: A Constellation of Histories

In the unique ring of its constellation, one and the 'same' date commemorates heterogeneous events, each suddenly neighbouring the other, even as one knows that they remain, and must remain, infinitely foreign.

Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*

Rights are not the product of lawyers but the expression of what people expect and claim for themselves. They articulate the essence of what it means to be a human being and a citizen in South Africa. They establish a broad social compact based on agreed common values in terms of which all our people in all their variety can live together in the same country. Rights can never be conferred. They belong to the people and not to the state or any political party.

African National Congress, "The ANC and the Bill of Rights: 1923 to 1993,  
A Seventy Year Survey"

This chapter asks what gave agency to the development of a particularly robust South African literary culture which informed creative and theoretical practice in South Africa. Who and what were the key figures, institutions or organizations responsible for cultural production? I set out to examine Sitas'<sup>1</sup> proposition that the "educated elite," the "school"(ed) exilic writers, were not at the forefront of change in South Africa. A shared collective experience of exiles in and outside South Africa participated in the tremendous production of poetry in the apartheid years. These arrivals and departures of words can be read as metaphors within South Africa under apartheid where the ability to say, to write, to speak, and to survive were imperatives:

i can say  
here the water spreads and spreads and spreads  
and the banks of this earth  
crack  
like a door giving in to an angry man  
I can say<sup>2</sup>

There was always a voice that could "say," in a performative sense, even when you were about to be swallowed up by the earth, you could still tell, with anger, what was happening...even if this altruistic gesture was ignored. That voice was a creative one though the particularities of individual voices are deeply embedded in South Africa's social and political history.

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<sup>1</sup> Sitas, "Traditions of Poetry in Natal," 307.

<sup>2</sup> Mongane Wally Serote, "From *No Baby Must Weep*," in *Ten South African Poets* ed. Adam Schwartzman (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), 45.

I will discuss South Africa's literary culture in relation to its history and to the development of human rights in South Africa as both intersect. We will discuss South African literary history from the first literary transcriptions at the time of foreign settlement to the years after the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 which saw the establishment of an Afrikaner hegemony after British domination. Particular emphasis is given to the modes or institutions of education, literature and publication and hence writing, reading or speaking as productions of literature both by their presence and absence, their "silence" in "a heart-beat that's loud to me."<sup>3</sup>

The dialogue between exilic literature and society is nowhere more apparent than in human rights discourse. The relationship between human rights declarations of intent and their interpretation, or lack thereof, travels through history with changing iterations of documents interacting with events, and cultural and political structures. I draw an analogy between human rights documents and the poetry of exiles: exilic poems intersect with societies and issues of human rights over long stretches of time. Exilic poetry talks back to memory as well as to reading texts and *their* relationships to the past. The poet writes and speaks with that knowledge to the poet's present. We send poems on their way into the future to stand as declarations or, for some exilic poets, as manifestos for rights or action. We are (of) that present and future. These poems are around us, echoes and shadows drawing filigree patterns across our desks....

By privileging and accepting a universal and pluralist definition of rights as social practice, I am suggesting that rights are not a construct if you feel the full weight of what it means to have *no* legislative, political or social rights although in such a situation, rights documents become paradoxically both essential and meaningless, but always potentially, with hope, meaningful. Looking at rights as social practice is another way of approaching the relationship between politics and poetry in literary theories as well as the poetry of South African writers exiled or imprisoned during the apartheid years when some activists argued that simply to write was not transformative. I am arguing that the poetry of exiles constituted writing towards an ideal of a just society and in this way contributed to the writing of rights in the new South Africa. With the echoes of words from many places, exilic poetry provided a robust contribution to South African literature. I agree with Mphahlele that the role of poetry as a transformative medium is embedded in South African history.

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<sup>3</sup> ———, "Alexandra," in *Ten South African Poets*, ed. Adam Schwartzman (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), 51.

I will thus briefly examine the history of rights with a digression musing on the pertinence of Percy Bysshe Shelley's poetics to South Africa in the twentieth-century before returning to South Africa's influence on rights discourse. I will show how South Africa presented a case for human rights to the UN in the same period when the world was necessarily preoccupied with events in Europe. South Africa's alternative realities sometimes encountered one another on the world stage.

In the following chapters, I look at the relationship between writing, altruism and exile, and the poetry and song of exiled South Africans.

### **Education in Exile**

One of the most debilitating results of apartheid was an unequal education system which left the greater part of the population illiterate and without formal education. A journey through the history of education in South Africa gives a remarkable insight into these early colonial years. An examination of the development of educational legislation and structures in South Africa uncovers the role of educational systems in shaping apartheid as well as the cultural habits of the emerging nation in terms of reading, writing and engagement with cultural representation itself. The ANC established the University of Robben Island as well as the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College in exile in Tanzania to ensure that education became a mainstay of imprisonment or exile. The antecedents of the Soweto riots and the final demise of apartheid can also be found in the long battle for equality in education and the workplace out of which emerged a vibrant culture in which the production of poetry flourished.

I examine the sociological or institutional factors which frame the literature of poets exiled within, and outside of, South Africa as a precursor to an aesthetic argument which tackles the language of exiled rights in South Africa and the relationship of this language to politics and poetry. I locate the emergence and voices of exilic poetry in South African linguistic and cultural tradition. Initially I focus on the institutional traditions developed through educational systems. On the whole exilic writers were exposed to educational systems which, in the views of some historians or sociologists,<sup>4</sup> did not produce the people or the organizations to rupture these structures through their political activism and their writing. This is a confronting view of exilic writers who, having been written out of or into exile and hence exilic scripts by apartheid

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<sup>4</sup> For example: Baruch Hirson, *Year of Fire, Year of Ash. The Soweto Revolt: Roots of a Revolution?* (London: Zed Press, 1979); Sitas, "Traditions of Poetry in Natal."

leaders, were in fact outside South Africa shaping the future in a divergent river of words, albeit separate from the political activism present within the country.

The historic Lovedale School was started by the Glasgow Missionary Society under the patronage of the Governor of the Cape, Sir George Grey and by 1885, 15,568 students were enrolled in various mission schools<sup>5</sup> across the country, a paltry number compared to the population size. The mission societies saw their role as a charitable one and were much disliked by the Dutch settlers for their influence and their belief in emancipation. Sparks<sup>6</sup> notes how this dislike was to carry forward into the twentieth-century. That government was to cut all funding to mission schools in the early years of their governance supports Sparks' observations. The influence of the mission schools on the lives of the exilic poets and of many opposition leaders was immense, even if only to serve as an initial source from which to protest against discrimination. This influence was also felt in the rise of the black evangelical church movements which played a role in promoting the songs and the oral poetry of the resistance years.

In 1876, Lovedale press began publishing the first newspaper written in the vernacular, *Isigidimi Sama-Xosa (The Xhosa Messenger)*.<sup>7</sup> This was produced by Dr. James Stewart, a Scottish Missionary and friend of Livingstone who became second principal of Lovedale. *Isigidima* had black editorship and was to run for eighteen years. Xhosa newspapers were to play a significant role in public dissent and debate in the twentieth-century. *Imvo Zabantsundu* edited by John Tengo Jabavu and *Izwi Labantu* edited by Walter Rubusana both had strong ties to the American Methodist Episcopal Church and were to take different views on the role of the Ethiopian movement in the development of a Pan-African religious identity in South Africa. This vigorous response to religious movements in America influenced the founder of the ANC Pixley ka Isaka Seme to rework his own philosophy for achieving equality and freedom in South Africa. In 1910 a book entitled *The Black Man, The Father of Civilisation, proven by Biblical History* published Seme's prize-winning Columbia University oration called *The Regeneration of Africa*.<sup>8</sup> Seme concludes with an appeal to the "humanistic" spirit of the new Africa and reads a

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>6</sup> Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa*, 67.

<sup>7</sup> R.H.W. Shepherd, *Lovedale and Literature for the Bantu: A Brief History and a Forecast* (Cape Province: Lovedale Press, 1945), 12.

<sup>8</sup> P. Ka Isaka Seme, "The Regeneration of Africa," in *The Black Man, the Father of Civilisation, Proven by Biblical History*, ed. James Morris Webb (Seattle: Acme Press, 1910). For further details on the New African Movement see Ntongela Masilela's web site <http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/NAM/> as well as a critique of Masilela's view by Laura Chrisman, "Black Modernity, Nationalism and Transnationalism: The

poem “O Africa” which will “shine as her sister lands with equal beam.”<sup>9</sup> (Published in this slim book with Seme’s article on black liberation in South Africa were extracts from a 1907 speech given by W.E.B. du Bois to the Social Study Clubs of Chicago University on *Education and Civilization*.)<sup>10</sup> Seme’s paper led to the formation of what has been called the New African Movement in South Africa, a radical intellectual movement.

In 1885 the year Lovedale was established as a school and a publishing house, a German linguist Wilhelm Bleek, with a special interest in Khoikhoi (as noted previously, the language of the nomadic Cape Bushmen), recorded a poem (one of many) told to him by a bushman named X-nanni. Called “Prayer to the Young Moon,” it is an oral poem about a “little” dialogue between the moon and the poet: “that I may eat something / you must speak to me about a little thing / that I may eat.”<sup>11</sup> The poem is firmly rooted in a conversation; the moon and the sun chart the rhythm of the day so that the poet may eat. The Bushman poems in the Cope and Krige anthology all record a dialogue with the land or with people who worked the land.<sup>12</sup> Some are animal songs; others are fables similar to Aesop’s fables.<sup>13</sup> Their relationship with an audience is far greater than the orators would ever have anticipated.

Such relationships create an intimate promise of the trusted encounters we discover in much exilic poetry. We can now read the recorded San writing of prisoners locked up in Robben Island for minor offences. The edifices of a written culture (newspapers, books and so on) were inaccessible to prisoners on Robben Island. Those who opposed the apartheid government, like their early forefathers, were given limited access to education albeit by correspondence. Amongst the twentieth-century group of prisoners were writers who, like the San prisoners, were initially deprived of an audience beyond the prison.

A preoccupation with the land and the cities, or with an ideal South Africa, has become almost a cliché in writing about exile due to the obvious relationship of exile to constructs such as belonging and identity. This theme appears in many poems, plays and songs, and not just as the obsessions of exilic writers. The land, the city, animals, nature, poverty or urban life become

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Challenge of Black South African Poetry,” in *Beyond the Black Atlantic : Relocating Modernization and Technology*, eds. Walter Goebel and Saskia Schabio (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Seme, “The Regeneration of Africa,” 49.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>11</sup> X-nanni, “Prayer to the Young Moon,” in *The Penguin Book of South African Verse*, eds. Jack Cope and Uys Krige (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 245.

<sup>12</sup> See also the rainmaker or magician in Xaa-ttin, “The Broken String,” in *The Penguin Book of South African Verse*, eds. Jack Cope and Uys Krige (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 248.

<sup>13</sup> “African Songs”, in *The Penguin Book of South African Verse*, eds. Jack Cope and Uys Krige (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 254-55.

metaphors for such varied presences and absences; images expand and become metonymic of the confluences and divergences of a state of exile.

I speak of my country in allusions: the golden goose transmogrified  
becomes the stormy petrel,  
IN EXILE<sup>14</sup>

The poet loses his soul in exile; “the lives seen in parentheses”<sup>15</sup> are forgotten lives lived away from the “Sharpeville afternoons.”<sup>16</sup>

We can therefore privilege the trope of relationships and dialogue in poems where the relationship with land or city has been seen to dominate. In fact much of South Africa’s literary landscape is predicated on, or informed by, the establishment of a dialogue or the nature of a relationship or attempts to build or create a presence among contemporaries. Serote is a good example of the continuation of this easy conversational style.

Language became a site of conflict as soon as it was perceived as a means of representation; to give expression to the alienation felt by different groups as they met resistance to their ideals. In this anguish of exclusion we can find the seeds of exilic poetry from the first slaves who, in exile, were schooled in the Dutch language, to the working-class poets of the 1970s who used their own indigenous or spoken language to reclaim their past. There is the exilic journalism of Pringle, his exported emigrant song, the poetry of the San transcribed by Bleek, the history of Lovedale as different groups tried to promote what they saw as the best interests of black South Africans within a missionary framework, and the growth of black newspapers which started to represent the views of a significant number of semi-literate and educated black South Africans. The expression of this conflict made its influence felt through official legislation. The gestation of how the British and Dutch settlers became exiled from a sense of brotherhood with all people and not just their fellow exiles also has its roots in the valorisation of a new language and a new nationalism as they adapted to their status as exiles in a new country.

Spark suggests that as the Westernization of the Cape developed so too did the seeds of African nationalism. It is intriguing to note that, according to Sparks, colonial or western influences were called “school... in the vernacular,”<sup>17</sup> while the tribal traditionalists were called “red” after “red imbola clay” or red ochre. This was the clay painted onto faces after initiation ceremonies to signify becoming of age, a sign of adulthood. According to Sparks, the “red” were

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<sup>14</sup> Nortje, “My Country Is Not”, 282-283.

<sup>15</sup> Nortje, see p.xii.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>17</sup> Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa*, 68.

at the forefront of resistance to white incursions into the interior while the “school” were those with more education, many of whom were to become the leaders of the ANC. Perhaps those who led the wars of resistance proved their manhood by painting their faces red as they went into battle (Sparks tells the tale of Makanda, a “red,” who was a war-prophet imprisoned on Robben Island in 1819 because of his part in the Fifth Frontier War). In this same period Governor Somerset was placing Scots ministers in Dutch Reformed churches as well as in the country schools he established.<sup>18</sup> Here was a meeting point between the “schools,” the educated Christians and the “reds.” British influences in education and the churches in South Africa came from Scotland, Oxford and to a lesser extent Cambridge.

From the start education was fragmented, if not separate. Opportunities for children quickly became dependent on colour and place of birth. The beginning of conflict within the linguistic history of South Africa had begun and literary production also splintered into different language groups each with its own mode of expression and its own audience. Interestingly this distinction enabled the discrete development of radical agendas within each language group, although the ANC played a part in uniting several diverging views on American, Pan and South African issues within one general oppositional group. The Dutch were to develop their own radical and reactionary tradition.

Educated Dutch settlers spoke English in the Cape. It was only much later after the Boer War that the birth of Afrikaans poetry calling for freedom and decrying the pain of suffering, “helped to formulate a clear consciousness of national identity.”<sup>19</sup> By 1908 the movement towards preservation of the Afrikaans language took root aided by the Afrikaans Language Movement at Stellenbosch University. As we have seen, the New African Movement was giving voice to radical nationalism in a distinctly separate but parallel development.

English and Scottish theories of education were transported to South Africa by the major institutions in Britain who sent preachers, educators and administrators to uphold and promote the prevailing opinions and outlooks of the time. The Empire was buzzing with news of its colonial expansions promising the prospect of careers abroad for some of the more adventurous. In 1846 when Professor Langham Dale arrived at the South African College from Oxford, he clashed with the only teacher there, Dr. James Adamson, over the shambolic disorder he encountered. It is almost comic to read about the early days of the South African College where the British tried to establish not so much a higher education institution as a senior college which would create administrative elites within the Cape by sending graduates to London for more

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<sup>18</sup> Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom*.

<sup>19</sup> Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa*, 43.



advanced study. Durrill<sup>20</sup> paints a vivid picture of a small group of disruptive students who were sent to a prison within the college called “the Black Hole”<sup>21</sup> for their wild behaviour. (The apocryphal tale of the Nawab of Bengal’s so-called Black Hole of Calcutta in 1756 was already becoming legendary as a place of “payback” or protest against British occupation). Such students, usually sons of Dutch settlers, had little interest in the disciplines being taught (classics, moral philosophy and the natural science) but instead sought to establish their own authority over the teachers, the janitor and eventually over one another. For Durrill this heralded the beginning of a culture of bullying which was replicated around the colonies and “became endemic to the middle-classes as a whole in the nineteenth-century.”<sup>22</sup> The Oxford graduates were to encounter hostility and irreverence at most of the four Anglican schools they established through South Africa. Despite the influences of mentors such as Thomas Arnold and Ruskin, there was little early involvement of the graduates in the actual teaching of black South Africans. This role was played by the Scottish missionaries who ran most of the mission schools in South Africa. They too encountered opposition to what was really a clash of cultures between different languages and different religions. Opposition to the British was to shape much of the Afrikaner character. Both the Afrikaners’ extension of, and opposition to, various British policies towards black South Africans formed the basis of apartheid.

It is interesting that the first signs of discontent in the mission and Native schools are documented from the middle of the nineteenth-century. The prime role of these early mission schools was to provide religious education, teach English and industrial education. While the early public and mission schools were not segregated, in fact segregation existed in the form of different curriculum for black and white South Africans, and in daily life (for example segregated dormitories, dining-halls, even different food). It was thus segregation and degradation that caused ongoing discontent in the early provision of schooling for black South Africans. Although there was widespread dissatisfaction with these schools, parents saw them as providing some opportunities for their children in the new economy. In 1983, the government passed legislation to subsidise white pupils only, a measure that was to apply to the miniscule government subsidies of mission schools. Only an extremely small number of Blacks were able to progress to higher education. The education Langham Dale envisaged in the mission and state schools would also educate a class of black teachers and preachers to continue the provision of basic schooling among Blacks. This was the trajectory followed by many of the exilic poets.

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<sup>20</sup> Wayne K. Durrill, “Shaping a Settler Elite,” *Journal of African History* 41 (2000).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

Nelson Mandela, the son of a chief councillor, was sent to the Clarksbury Mission School and thereafter to the Wesleyan Mission School of Healdtown where he matriculated. He was later expelled from Fort Hare for joining a student protest. Mamphela Ramphele's intellectual tradition stemmed not from the Oxford of Langham Dale but from the Dutch Reform Church missionaries in South Africa. Ramphele's father was a teacher who, as a black headmaster, could work within the Afrikaner school system within which he had no autonomy or freedom. Ramphele was schooled at a Dutch Reform Church teacher training college named Bethesda where, influenced by the Black Consciousness movement, she protested against the discriminatory conditions to which black students were exposed. Here the level of teaching was so poor that Ramphele "felt bored most of the time"<sup>23</sup> and decided early on to be a doctor: "it was not the desire to serve which influenced my career choice, but the passion for freedom to be my own mistress in a society in which being black and woman defined the boundaries within which one could legitimately operate."<sup>24</sup> Meeting Steve Biko at university she was drawn into student activism and the influence of Biko, Fanon and Césaire.

By the turn of the century compulsory white schooling had been established in the Orange Free State as well as in a system of farm schools for whites in the Afrikaner republics of the Transvaal and parts of the Orange Free State. However white attendance at schools remained low in the two republics as well as in Natal. In the British-run provinces of the Cape and Natal legislation was already underway to segregate education in the same way that land tenure was coming under control of the Native Law. From 1893 Native Education became the preserve of government in Natal and in 1899 Indians were excluded from government schools for whites.

By 1905 just before the British colonies and the Afrikaner republics became the Union of South Africa (1910) only 2.1% of the black population attended school<sup>25</sup> with only twenty-two people matriculating between 1910 and 1920. At the same time with increasing urbanization, attempts were being made to preserve the Afrikaans language against the dominance of English in schools. In the Cape and the Transvaal Afrikaans teachers' organizations lobbied for Afrikaans to be taught in junior years and in 1925 "Afrikaans replaced Dutch as the second official language, whose legal equality with English was written into the constitution."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Mamphela Ramphele, *A Life* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1995), 44.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Freda Troup, *Forbidden Pastures: Education under Apartheid* (London: International Defence and Aid Fund, 1976), 14.

<sup>26</sup> Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom*, 48.

The issue of a diverse and unequal means of educating the population confronted the first Union government. Protest about inequality in funding had already reached the British Colonial Office and in 1904 Martin Lutuli requested the transfer of black education from mission schools to the State. The South African Native Congress had criticized the influence of Langham Dale who, they believed, had kept the majority of Blacks out of the state education system.

In 1935 Clement Doke, a South African educated missionary published an article “Vernacular Textbooks in South African Native Schools.”<sup>27</sup> Here he delves into the schoolbooks being provided to the various provinces outlining six major language groups which crossed over the provinces. Bibles were available in a variety of black languages but there were problems for administrators in deciding which would be standard bibles for their province. He quotes from the *Primary School Syllabus for Native Schools in the Bechuanaland Protectorate*: “Unfortunately there is great difficulty experienced in obtaining secular reading matter”<sup>28</sup> in the vernacular. It appears that initially the provincial administrations tried to teach in the vernacular with English as the medium of instruction for English and as pupils progressed for other subjects as well. This picture is not consistent amongst the provinces or the types of schools. Certainly those training to be teachers received instruction in English.

Language choice in South Africa was a major problem for exilic writers who had to choose between writing in their home language or the language of their potential audience in the wider world.

The first black higher education institution, the South African Native College (later the University of Fort Hare) was established in 1916 by Scottish missionaries. Most of the staff were white and had missionary connections. In this year the University Act of South Africa officially merged the South African College into the University of Cape Town and another college, Victoria College, became the University of Stellenbosch. The generic University of South Africa was the main examining body for these universities. Before 1916 any black South African desiring higher education had to go overseas and indeed this is what happened; the first president of the ANC the Reverend John Dube was sent to America by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions where he was exposed to the ideas of the Black Nationalist Booker T. Washington. The University of the Witwatersrand opened in 1921 closely followed by the University of Pretoria in 1930. Only the universities of the Cape, Witwatersrand and Natal (established in 1949) were able to admit black students. Attendance at lectures was the only non-

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<sup>27</sup> Clement Doke, “Vernacular Textbooks in South African Native Schools,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 8, no. 2 (April, 1935).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

segregated activity in which they could partake on campus. By 1957 only 1.3% of all university students were black.<sup>29</sup> Two new university colleges opened in 1959 at the same time as the ANC and PAC were banned. The two new colleges, Turfloop (the University of the North) and Ngoye (primarily for Zulus), were followed by an Indian (University of Durban-Westville) and Coloured (University of the Western Cape) college.

As we have seen, from its early beginning in 1652 education for black South Africans was linked to a form of social control rather than equality of knowledge and opportunity. This form of education, so prevalent around the world, was to change with the educational reforms of the 1960s and 70s in Europe. While in South Africa 1970s resistance poetry was a direct protest against South Africa's enduring legacy of separate and unequal education, it was also a result of a more liberal form of education which had taken root around the world and in South African universities. This resistance was also supported by trade unions which called for educational opportunities in the workplace as well as general industrial reform such as better wages and working conditions.

Student protests at these universities continued unabated through the 1960s and 1970s and led to the formation of the black consciousness group SASO (South African Student's Organization). SASO was formed at Marianhill, the college founded by Catholic Trappist monks in 1882. It was at Marianhill that Mazisi Kunene matriculated in what was to become a long career devoted to the ANC, poetry and the arts. Poetry had a tremendous effect on popular protest and government legislation, the latter by banning and censorship because of its growing popularity. Combrink and Davey<sup>30</sup> suggest alternative ways of considering historically low levels of reading and literacy in post-apartheid South Africa such as encouraging forms of cultural production which are booming: one of these is radio; the other is the music industry. Sitas and O'Brien<sup>31</sup> are correct to say that the "success" of poetry, particularly in the dark, bleak years in South Africa, was its oral nature; poetry was not a medium dependent on publication and production or on academic promotion and could also be quick to create and disseminate. I discuss this further in Chapter 6. However dissemination and publication of poetry was assisted by the agency given to poetry by academia as well as by trade unions and the ANC.

In this section I have tackled one way of recreating the cultural milieu for poetry and its production in South Africa. Rather than assume it is antithetical for academic institutions to have

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<sup>29</sup>Troup, *Forbidden Pastures: Education under Apartheid* .

<sup>30</sup> Nicholas Combrink and Maggie Davey, "We Will Publish What You Deem to Be Great: A Dialogue About Trade Publishing and Its Readers in South Africa," in *The Politics of Publishing in South Africa*, eds. Nicholas Evans and Monica Seeber (London Holger Ehling Publications, 2000).

<sup>31</sup> O'Brien, *Against Normalization: Writing Radical Democracy in South Africa* .

informed the production of popular poetry, we should see this poetry and academia as part of the same continuum in the production of works of literature, be they written or spoken. In fact in South Africa it was the state that informed, even if indirectly, both the content of universities and the production of poetry, particularly the poetry of South African exiles.

It is perhaps fashionable in post-apartheid South Africa to negate some contributions from academia towards change in pre-apartheid South Africa. The climate of fear created by the apartheid government was widespread and there were many academics who risked their lives for change. There were academics such as the philosopher Rick Turner who used every legal or illegal avenue to further the anti-apartheid cause and their writings and speeches intersected with, and were embraced by, formal opposition movements such as the ANC or by grassroots organizations such as trade unions. Rick Turner was murdered soon after his friend Steve Biko in 1978 though his assassins were never found. English departments straddled the divide between theory and practice always intent on seeing literature as part of the lived experience and waging, as we have seen, many internal debates on their own role in politics in South Africa.

Anthony O'Brien has devoted his entire, eminently readable and erudite book *Against Normalization*<sup>32</sup> to examining grassroots cultural activities in South Africa in the eighties, namely local cultural organizations and writers' groups or trade unions, which he validly sees as creating cultural and political change in South Africa. He believes the activities and organization of these groups should provide a model for the kind of radical democracy anticipated in the 1980s which he maintains should be pursued, even against the backdrop of the global capital economic policies adopted by post-1994 South African governments. A glance at current public pronouncements about the arts and the number of literary conferences and events in South Africa show a culture alive with possibilities even if funding for the arts is not a government priority; it never was!

Early in his book O'Brien gives notice of his intention to exclude most white writers:

That does not imply that the better-known white writers have no place in the formation of a radical democratic culture... but against the judgement of the metropolitan critics, I do see their place as more marginal.<sup>33</sup>

Why write about university culture? Why examine South African poetry production as occupying a space within its colonial roots in most South African universities? Perhaps it is instructive to consider the pages O'Brien devotes to Njabulo Ndebele who struggled as an academic to develop an African theory of literature, yet believed that change in writing would come from embracing the everyday, the "ordinary." At this point in our enquiry I suggest that it

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> O'Brien, *Against Normalization: Writing Radical Democracy in South Africa*, 2.

is useful to refer back to the memories exilic poets have of the influential people and books which fostered their love of writing, a diverse, canonical influence encouraged and embraced by academia. O'Brien questions whether the radical movements which gave rise to grassroots writing were "placed there" from without, namely from the radical left within the universities (so Njabulo Ndebele argued in his development of a black theory of writing) or whether such movements had the capacity to develop without the influence of the intellectual. Suttner varies Gramsci's proposition proposing the idea of a "collective organic intellectual"<sup>34</sup> in South Africa.

For O'Brien, as the ANC began to negotiate a successful transition of power, "'the social text' of the university as a site of struggle"<sup>35</sup> starts to emerge. This is a struggle which has seen ambivalent positions foundering on the basic illiteracy of the majority of the population and on attempts to rewrite the South African "English Studies" canon. As we have seen, the "English Studies" canon is much broader; it encompasses a legacy of colonial educational institutions whose *absence* for the majority of the population also gave rise to several dominant strands of oral and literary traditions. And both traditions sit well with Derrida's notion of becoming through words.

From archival material we learn that the teaching of English per se at the University of Cape Town followed the British tradition of having a professorship which combined English Literature with Moral Philosophy before separating into two chairs. In Cape Town what became the Chair of English Language and Literature was further divided when de Beers sponsored a Professorship in English Language in 1920. From 1955 to 1971, the Australian Professor Robert Guy Howarth became the Arderne Professor of English Literature at the university. By the time Nobel Prize-winner J.M. Coetzee, now resident in Adelaide, Australia, took up a professorship in English, the title bestowed on him was Professor of General Literature (1984) while in 1991 the two fields come together again with the appointment of the novelist and critic André Brink as Professor of English Language and Literature. Certain details of academic appointments provide some amusement in the context of the brief history above; for example the novelist Tolkien withdrew from his candidature for Professor of English at the University of Cape Town. The selection panel commented, that "Unfortunately he may have to withdraw for family reasons, and again he may obtain a Chair in this Country [sic]."<sup>36</sup> To be successful academically it was useful if you were also a writer.

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<sup>34</sup> Nesbitt, "Review Article: Postcolonial Anxieties (Re)Presenting African Intellectuals," , 274.

<sup>35</sup> O'Brien, *Against Normalization: Writing Radical Democracy in South Africa*, 66.

<sup>36</sup>University of Cape Town. Selection Panel. [University of Cape Town Library cor. 12.1920]. Archival unpublished and untitled paper, 1920.

We have seen that an examination of English studies in academic institutions to some extent highlights a gulf between academia and grassroots actions, the latter moving along at its own pace of originality and creativity. However Ari Sitas, University of Natal sociologist, poet and academic, was instrumental in developing the Durban Worker's project which stirred a new level of involvement in poetry in the Natal region thus bridging this divide. So the development of English studies in South Africa took place within academia and elsewhere as O'Brien's book is at pains to demonstrate. I have been exploring what aspect of poetry production was marginalized or in exile (that highly debatable and contestable question). Our exilic poets, to be discussed in chapters 6 and 7, bring a range of all these influences to their poetry. Our questions could lead to different answers; we could ask whether academia was and remains "colonized."<sup>37</sup> What role, for example, did English academics play in promoting or establishing links with Africa, African literature and other African universities?

Maake<sup>38</sup> discusses the Onitsha market in Nigeria where pamphlets brought to Onitsha by returning soldiers grew in circulation and popularity and encouraged general literacy in the vernacular amongst an otherwise non-reading population. The equivalent in South Africa was sometimes vernacular or oral poetry often published in newspapers or recited at trade union functions in the 1970s and 1980s. The availability of the publications of exilic poets, and hence access to their being read in South Africa, quickly declined with new legislation in the 1960s in spite of the tremendous growth in radical publishing and radical publishing presses in the 1970s and 80s.

Maake is scathing about the role of universities in promoting "African" literature, his prime concern being literature in languages other than English of which South Africa has eleven. He sees academia as being primarily the "gate-keepers and censors"<sup>39</sup> of African literature. Given the legislated restrictions on any growth in vernacular language publishing or their use in official capacities, English was seen as a preferable alternative to Afrikaans, the language of the oppressor.

A possible point of intersection is therefore that between song and poetry or between writers, grassroots cultural activists and academics joining together to form, for example COSAW. COSAW's predecessors were the Writers and Artists Guild of South Africa (1974),

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<sup>37</sup> Eve Gray, "Academic Publishing in South Africa," in *The Politics of Publishing in South Africa*, eds. Nicholas Evans and Monica Seeber (London: Holger Ehling Publications, 2000), 181.

<sup>38</sup> Nhlanhla Maake, "Publishing and Perishing: Books, People and Reading in African Languages in South Africa," in *The Politics of Publishing in South Africa*, eds. Nicholas Evans and Monica Seeber (London: Holger Ehling Publications, 2000).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

and then the South African branch of PEN which was still predominantly white. PEN was disbanded in 1982 and replaced with the African Writers Association in 1982, followed in 1987 by COSAW, an organization devoted to the use of writing as a means of political change. COSAW members included Ari Sitas, Nadine Gordimer, Njabulo Ndebele, Vusi Mahlasela (poet and singer) and Andries Oliphant, academic and poet, later an academic at the University of South Africa.

As we have seen, educational segregation was legislated by numerous acts of government. Academics frequently contributed to and debated the issue of academic freedom.<sup>40</sup> A bibliography of South African university apartheid was already being published in 1959 with thirty pages of entries on the subject.<sup>41</sup> There was no lack of writing about education even though the greater majority of the population remained, and is still, illiterate. In post-apartheid South Africa more than 5% of the GDP is spent on education,<sup>42</sup> higher than Australia and the United States though on a par with Singapore, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia (the highest), Canada, France and Norway/Finland. This acknowledges that an urgent catch-up is needed to establish adequate levels of literacy.

Mabogo More has examined the role of philosophers in pre- and post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>43</sup> He explains the differences in emphasis within higher education institutions which were divided along racial and linguistic lines, with an Anglo-Saxon philosophical tradition predominating in English-speaking universities and a continental, generally Calvinistic philosophical tradition found in the Afrikaans universities. Black universities would offer a mix of traditions. The teaching of philosophy began as early as 1873 and was originally allied to the teaching of English with the Chair of Philosophy and English at the University of Cape Town becoming two separate chairs in 1903. More demonstrates how the neo-Calvinistic, neo-Fichtean philosophy promoted by Afrikaans universities formed the basis of the philosophy of apartheid. He gives the example of a Professor of Political Philosophy at the University of the Orange Free State (an Afrikaans university) Nico Diederichs, who later became a Minister of Finance, and “constructed a social metaphysics opposed to human equality.”<sup>44</sup> On the other hand R. F. A. Hoernle, the first Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cape Town, followed British

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<sup>40</sup> For example, R. Hoffenburt, “Science and Apartheid,” *Nature* 197 (March 23, 1963).

<sup>41</sup> A.M. Macdonald, *A Contribution to a Bibliography on University Apartheid* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town, School of Librarianship, 1959).

<sup>42</sup> OCLC, “2003 Environmental Scan: Worldwide Education and Library Spending,” accessed June 26, 2008, <http://www.oclc.org/reports/escan/economic/educationlibraryspending.htm>.

<sup>43</sup> Mabogo P. More, “Philosophy in South Africa under and after Apartheid,” in *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.



empiricism and “became one of the major figures in the intellectual formation of South African liberalism”<sup>45</sup> arguing, ironically, for racial separation rather than assimilation.

The point of More’s article is to show how no aspect of “African” philosophy entered the discourse of institutionalised philosophy just as Ndebele would argue that no aspect of black writing entered the discourse of university English studies.<sup>46</sup> Where such critical writing did exist, it was sometimes used by followers of apartheid to justify their own philosophical positions by pointing out presumed marked differences in constructs of social discourse. O’Brien quotes the Zimbabwean novelist Dambudzo Marechera who reflected, when asked why he did not write in Shona:

It never occurred to me. Shona was part of the ghetto demon I was trying to escape. Shona had been placed within the context of a degraded, mind wrenching experience from which apparently the only escape was into the English language and education...I was therefore a keen accomplice and student in my own mental colonisation.<sup>47</sup>

Interestingly More attributes developments in African philosophy to some of the writers in this study, for example Es’kia Mphahlele, Mazisi Kunene and Dennis Brutus,<sup>48</sup> and of course the growth of the black consciousness movement in the 1980s. More comes back to the concept of ubuntu, to African humanism, to what he calls “humanness.” So More too positions the radicalization of writing outside formal institutions or universities.

Like many other countries in Africa, South Africa has a predominantly illiterate population. Colonial education was designed to keep the “natives” in a “naïve” state as made abundantly clear by the statements of many academics and politicians. In 1938 a senior lecturer in Education at South Africa’s oldest university, the University of Cape Town, declared: “Certainly there does not seem any point in making literate within the next decade or two the whole body of the Bantu peoples.”<sup>49</sup> The history of the University of Fort Hare, South Africa’s first black university, is symbolic of the stages of discrimination to which black students were exposed.

Zeleza makes an observation similar to Johnson’s description of South Africa as a social science experiment, namely that Africa has been “central to the construction of the modern

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>46</sup> Ndebele, “Liberation and the Crisis of Culture,” 6.

<sup>47</sup> O’Brien, *Against Normalization: Writing Radical Democracy in South Africa*, 246.

<sup>48</sup> More, “Philosophy in South Africa under and after Apartheid,” 156.

<sup>49</sup> E.G. Pells, *European, Coloured and Native Education in South Africa 1652-1938* (Johannesburg: Juta and Co., 1938), 142.

world,”<sup>50</sup> from slavery to South Africa, particularly in the period 1960 to 1980 when the anti-apartheid cause dominated so many movements for change in non-African countries. Jeremy Cronin described his most important academic influence as an Afrikaner philosopher, Professor of Ethics at the University of Cape Town, Martin Versfeld. In an interview with Helena Sheehan, Cronin said of him:

He taught Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas and Descartes...He was also writing books about cooking and cuisine, but trying to integrate...different dimensions of life, and to think intellectually about that kind of integration, which was very different from what was increasingly becoming the dominant tradition in UCT...anglo-saxon philosophy was becoming increasingly dominant.<sup>51</sup>

South African censorship of academia even ventured abroad. Geoffrey Davis,<sup>52</sup> put together a book on apartheid for German schoolchildren. The book was banned within South Africa and two contributors subsequently withdrew their rights to have their work included in a book which they regarded as representing radical political views. In addition a teacher using the book in Germany received a letter from the South African Embassy in Germany criticizing the content of the book for presenting distorted views of South African life.

A debate at Northwestern University in 1987 about the role of writers in South African society was organised by the publishers of the respected journal *Triquarterly*,<sup>53</sup> seeking to bring together South African writers in exile as well as writers from within South Africa. In reflecting on the state of culture and politics in South Africa, Njabulo Ndebele asked: “In the reconstruction of society, what progressive societal role do we ascribe to cultural practice in the South African context?”<sup>54</sup> The answers to Ndebele’s question can be summarised as a desire for a recognition of Africanness and African languages and literature, as well as a hope that the broad vehicles of cultural production recognise the cultural changes generated by people’s education in South Africa in the 1970s and 80s; that to reconstitute new cultural practices means negating the “enforced silences”<sup>55</sup> of the past. One of the Northwestern speakers, who addressed the conference in Zulu and was translated by Mazisi Kunene, was the South African poet Alfred

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<sup>50</sup> Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, “The Politics of Historical and Social Science Research in Africa,” *Journal of African Studies* 28, no. 1 (2002), 10.

<sup>51</sup> Helena Sheehan and Jeremy Cronin, “Interview,” accessed December 2, 2004, <http://www.comms.dcu.ie/sheehan/za/cronin02.htm>.

<sup>52</sup> Geoffrey V. Davis, *Voices of Justice and Reason: Apartheid and Beyond in South African Literature* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003).

<sup>53</sup> Reginald Gibbons, ed., *Writers from South Africa: Culture, Politics and Literary Theory and Activity in South Africa Today* (Evanston: Triquarterly Books, 1989).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

Temba Qabula. Identifying himself as one of the people's poets, Qabula related a story of police interrogation after he had started writing:

They would ask me whether I'd been to university, but I told them "I have not been to university myself, but I've been to a higher and a better university." University of life in the factory, in the hostel where I live in terrible conditions, in the country where I worked, in the mines, this was my greatest university.<sup>56</sup>

Such a metaphor runs through the poetry of South Africans in exile within and outside South Africa; what has this English culture, this university ideal, taught other than the hardship of apartheid. With a wonderful flourish Qabula ends his speech, "I must say, in the end – *of course English is so weak!* [sic] – I must say that things are changing..."<sup>57</sup>

In another bizarre twist of history and confronting our assumption about the enlightenment of tertiary institutions, the person whose policy of separate development later demonised English and black universities was an academic.

The father of apartheid, Hendrik Verwoerd, was born in Holland but was brought to South Africa at the age of 2. He was initially brought up in the Cape where he attended an English boy's school, an experience which formed his ambivalence and distrust towards the English and the English language. Verwoerd was only exposed to fellow speakers of Afrikaans at the age of sixteen when the family settled in the Orange Free State. He continued to embrace Afrikaans at Stellenbosch University where he studied theology and psychology. Verwoerd rejected an offer to study at Oxford in favour of Germany where his mentor had studied and he then travelled to America before returning to become Professor of Psychology at Stellenbosch. He was to use his American influences in his teaching prescribing American textbooks (not textbooks from England) and under the influence of American social science established South Africa's first Department of Sociology and Social Work. He construed the theoretical position of the department around pragmatic positivism<sup>58</sup> rather than the ideas of continental theorists such as Durkheim. According to Miller, in his academic years Verwoerd wrote little about race but clearly concentrated his research on whites. Like other academics at Stellenbosch at the time he did not appear to give much weight to theories about racial differences in IQ. However Stellenbosch professors were much influenced by the ideology of National Socialism, holding anti-semitic meetings and lobbying the Prime Minister D.F. Malan in 1936 to stop Jewish immigration to South Africa, a move defeated in Parliament.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>58</sup> Roberta Balstad Miller, "Science and Society in the Early Career of H. F. Verwoerd," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 19, no. 4 (December, 1993).

After coming to power in 1948, the Nationalist Government appointed the Eiselen Commission to provide a plan for the provision of Native education. The report was to expand principles already in place, namely that Natives should not be educated beyond their expected role in the labour force and that education should be based on the principles of Christian National Education. Funding of what was to become Bantu Education would be subsidized but on the whole funds would have to be provided by the Bantu themselves. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 enshrined this inequality in legislation. Verwoerd, by then the Minister for Native Affairs, would say: “When I have control of native education I will reform it so that natives will be taught from childhood to realize that equality with Europeans is not for them.”<sup>59</sup>

The first ANC boycott of government schools was called in 1954 but did not go ahead after the government threatened to expel children not at school. Such was the price of education, that children faced no education if they did not heed the threat.

The Bantu Education Act brought to an end any subsidies for mission schools and the five thousand mission schools diminished to about 438 by 1971. State-owned schools for black South Africans were poorly funded and parents had to subsidise the salaries of teachers, equipment and library books. Instruction in black schools was in both English and Afrikaans and there were prescribed library books (1,198 titles only) regularly inspected by an Inspector of Bantu School Libraries.<sup>60</sup> By March 1973 only 5,736 black pupils had reached the fifth form of school<sup>61</sup> out of just over three million black students. Before 1948 school protests were internal in that they were related specifically to conditions within schools. In 1946 students at Lovedale created an organization called “The Board,” “Borrowed, it appears, from ‘The Board of Guardians’ in *Oliver Twist*.”<sup>62</sup> This group called for the removal of the headmaster and organised a strike of students. Their punishment was the denial of further education at Fort Hare. Those who made it to Fort Hare continued this tradition of strikes and boycotts once more focused on internal factors such as food or subjugation to physical violence. Poetry became a means of expressing discontent not with the internal workings of schools but with the general exclusion from equal opportunity in education and society alike.

In 1943 the ANC formed a youth wing which was to draw most of its membership from graduates of the private mission schools of Lovedale, Healdtown, Adams College or St.Peters in Johannesburg. This group later made contact with Fort Hare students and had among its earliest members Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo and Walter Sisulu. The Congress Youth League had

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<sup>59</sup> Troup, *Forbidden Pastures: Education under Apartheid*, 22.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>62</sup> Hirson, *Year of Fire, Year of Ash. The Soweto Revolt: Roots of a Revolution?* 31.

connections with the Non-European Unity Movement with which a newly formed Teachers' League of South Africa also had ties. The Teacher's League group actively campaigned against the formation of a Coloured Affairs Department in the Smuts government and became known as the anti-CAD group. This group was to prepare the way for the Coloured student protests and union organisers of the 1970s when Black Consciousness included the Cape Coloureds in their movement and the rise of Coloured leaders gave impetus to the struggle for change in the next decade. Under Henry Isaacs, the national president of the South African Student's Organization, SASO became the first organization to rally round the Soweto students in 1976.

It was this educational milieu from which most of the exilic writers were to emerge. Education was a major site in which the struggle for human rights and racial equality in South Africa developed. Another was in the trade unions which informed the poetry of many workers and inziles.

### **Human Rights in Exile**

In surveying the history of its involvement in South African rights discourse, the ANC privileged three major notions of rights: that they are intrinsic to what it means to be human, that they only exist in terms of social practice and that they should be independent of government. These have been contested ideals over time and particularly in South Africa. In his paper on the relationship between culture and the constitution in the new South Africa, Sachs put forward the view that once the constitutional challenges had been resolved, namely equality, political rights and freedom of expression for all, cultural diversity in South Africa would not be the problematic created by apartheid.

What is the language of rights and how did this language affect the move towards human rights in South Africa? How was the poetry of twentieth-century South Africa affected by rights discourse? Were rights the dream and the hope within which the poetry was written? Or was the poet Wally Serote correct when he said that the "unity of Africans" was an "invention" which "was also the beginning of the creation of a united, non-racial and democratic South Africa"?<sup>63</sup> Was Serote's poetry the invention of a dream of rights? Philosophical concepts of rights are usually hopeful or altruistic, always moving forwards and often proposing a future legislative or political normative framework which can implement such rights for the benefit of all. However, these concepts are also based on the notion of exclusion and are thus implicitly documents which

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<sup>63</sup> Coetzee and Polley, eds., *Crossing Borders: Writers Meet the ANC*, 94.

register loss. If their truths are self-evident (see Lynn Hunt)<sup>64</sup> they are nevertheless stated for a purpose often due to the lack of practical application of such truths. Whom do rights documents address? In South Africa the audience was broad being both international and national. The literary product had a more problematic audience. For the exiled poet Rebecca Matlou, the South African women writers' role was "to create a hopeful literature"<sup>65</sup> for the creation of a humane society however limited and marginalised that role and audience might be for black women writers.

The South African Constitution includes a Bill of Rights<sup>66</sup> hailed as one of the most progressive of such documents in the world. In addition to asserting "human dignity, equality and freedom," the Bill also protects the rights of citizens to "property, housing, health care, food, water and social security."<sup>67</sup> While this Bill expands on previous international declarations of the rights of people or personhood, we can see that the language used here is different. The authors assert that a "collective wisdom," the voices of "ordinary citizens, civil society and political parties," have contributed to this Constitution. The Bill addresses the current population of South Africa however, by virtue of promising to address all the exclusions of the past must also privilege the past as the reason for the need for such a detailed document of rights. We can assume (i.e. take it as self-evident) that collective wisdom includes the history and writing of dissidence to apartheid. The Constitution places culture in the context of rights; Right 30 states that:

Everyone has the right to use the language and to participate in the cultural life of their choice, but no one exercising these rights may do so in a manner inconsistent with any provision of the Bill of Rights.<sup>68</sup>

The evolution of the philosophies of human rights has been extensively documented and debated. The historical roots of such debates usually centre on most major European philosophers and the documents of the French National Assembly's Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, the American Declaration of Independence and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The words "resistance to oppression"<sup>69</sup> appear in the French Declaration of 1789, not in the English Bill of Rights a century before (1689). The Organization of African Unity produced an "African Charter on Human and People's Rights" while in South

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<sup>64</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2007).

<sup>65</sup> Coetzee and Polley, eds., *Crossing Borders: Writers Meet the ANC*, 123.

<sup>66</sup> Constitutional Assembly of South Africa, "Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996," accessed April 25, 2009, <http://www.info.gov.za/documents/constitution/index.htm>.

<sup>67</sup> Coetzee and Polley, eds., *Crossing Borders: Writers Meet the ANC*, 123.

<sup>68</sup> Constitutional Assembly of South Africa, "Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996,"

<sup>69</sup> Reprinted in Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History*, 221.

Africa the ANC had already produced a statements on rights in 1921 followed by Bills of Rights in 1923 and 1943 and its Freedom Charter on 26<sup>th</sup> June 1955.

Clearly throughout the history of rights there has been a vast interplay of ideas stemming from the actual to the imaginary to the documented and to the reality of how people's lives are affected by politics. Hunt asserts that: "there is no easy or obvious way to prove or even measure the effect of new cultural experiences on eighteenth-century people, much less on their conceptions of rights,"<sup>70</sup> however, we do know that by the end of the French Revolution and the subsequent 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, the language of rights spoke to Percy Bysshe Shelley and his contemporaries in England, either directly as with Wordsworth and Coleridge or indirectly for Shelley by what he had read and experienced. While we surmise an author's intended audience, we cannot know how history will answer back or interpret the written word as experienced in different social circumstances. The Romantics rejuvenated writing by engaging literature with views influenced by current social practices. Early rights documents encouraged a writer like Shelley to engage with the inequalities of his society and in turn Shelley's writing was to influence many exiled South Africans. Similarly, exiled South African poets embraced writing their own rights agendas and their own literature as socially transformative acts. Their intent was altruistic. Rights language reached beyond France, England, Holland and America into the colonies themselves.

Shelley was expelled from Eton at a young age for publishing a pamphlet on atheism. He then went to Ireland where, with knowledge of the French revolution fresh in his mind, he was radicalized by his exposure both to poverty and to the Catholic fight for freedom from Britain. He had read<sup>71</sup> Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, William Godwin's *Political Justice* and Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* and was imbued with the ideas behind words such as liberty, toleration, truth and justice. O'Brien presents a picture of Shelley as a poet who deliberately chose to tackle issues of oppression and injustice in his poems and one who was all too aware of the potentially seditious nature of his political writing turning these into pamphlets which could be easily circulated, sometimes anonymously. Poems too provided a vehicle with which to explore hypothetical ideas of how tyranny or oppression could be overcome.

While in Ireland Shelley wrote his pamphlet *A Declaration of Rights* which was published for the first time in England in 1819. The document, although universalistic, is clearly couched in language that can be applied directly to the particular situation of English rule in

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>71</sup> Paul O'Brien, *Shelley and Revolutionary Ireland* (London and Dublin: Redwords, 2002).

Ireland. Shelley was primarily writing to the people of Ireland while his influence made slow progress across the seas.

There are thirty-one statements of rights in Shelley's declaration.<sup>72</sup> These rights are far-ranging moving from the role of government to the use or abuse of violence and the freedom of movement and religion. Shelley was primarily concerned with the responsibility of government in securing the rights of man which he defines as "liberty and all equal participation in the commonage of nature" (number 3). We have seen that the South African Constitution has evolved to place the onus on the people who elect governments. Shelley's intention was also for the common ownership of all aspects of life. Like Paine, he hoped that the rights would bring "happiness and freedom." He believed in government by a majority: "the minority should not disturb them" (number 5). He toyed with notions of rights versus duties and truth which are not only the responsibility of governments but also of "man." He extended the idea of rights from one country to another. "Man, whatever his country," has the same right in one place as another, the right of universal citizenship (number 20). Césaire and Senghor, as deputies to the French Assembly, brought this argument to France resulting in French legal and political rights for citizens of the Senegalese and Martinique communes. Shelley includes all religions as having "equal rights," deliberately listing these as "A Christian, a Deist, a Turk and a Jew" (number 24). In very chatty language he pleads: "No man has a right to monopolize more than he can enjoy: what the rich give to the poor, whilst millions are starving, is not a perfect favour, but an imperfect right" (number 28). He recognised the moral hubris and condescension of his time. Shelley's Declaration is a call to action: "Awake! – arise – or be for ever fallen,"<sup>73</sup> and he was to take up the same argument in his poetry as well as in his tract *A Defence of Poetry* (discussed later in this chapter). In a poem by Robert Grendon published in 1903 in Natal's black newspaper, Shelley's words reappear: "Awake! – Arise! – go forth and do! / Nor question how or why or where / Or when."<sup>74</sup>

Barcus makes the point that contrary to general belief "a close reading of the entire contemporary critical literature reveals that the reviewers and critics, far from neglecting Shelley,

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<sup>72</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley in Verse and Prose: Now First Brought Together with Many Pieces Not before Published. Edited with Prefaces, Notes and Appendices by Harry Buxton Forman.* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1880).

<sup>73</sup> Shelley, "Declaration of Rights," 392.

<sup>74</sup> Robert Grendon, "To You Abantu *What Man's Accomplished Ye Can Do*," in *The Return of the Amasi Bird*, eds. Tim Couzens and Essop Patel (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982), 31.



firmly established him as one of England's finest poets,"<sup>75</sup> while often disagreeing with his stance on social and political issues. His political voice however, was largely lost on his contemporaries and it remained for future generations to contemplate the ideas Shelley espoused by linking his politics with his poetry. In his fascinating book Franta<sup>76</sup> develops the thesis that Shelley was not in fact writing for his contemporaries being aware of the possible transformative process poetry could have on future generations. Shelley thus saw writing itself as a political act. In the face of hostile reactions to his political views, Shelley was forced to defend himself: "but I believe the truth is, I write less for the public than myself."<sup>77</sup> Franta asserts that Shelley was not interested in the effect of his poetry on the public but rather what the public would do with his poetry, particularly beyond his life and into the future. We explore this paradigm further in relation to the poetry of exiled South Africans.

Explaining the derivations of the term "human rights," Hunt reminds us that in the eighteenth-century the word human was used to distinguish people from the divine and from animals and thus in England the preferred terms were natural rights or rights, while the French settled on "rights of man."<sup>78</sup> Hunt points to the emotional aspects of rights such as the ability to empathise with others who are subject to violations of rights. If Hunt is correct then we need to examine the development, or lack thereof, of empathy in the governing bodies of apartheid South Africa, a fascinating topic for another thesis. Repeatedly the appeal from cultural workers in South Africa such as exiled or inziled writers, poets or activists was for a "human" response to black South Africans. By the nineteenth-century, despite the abolition of slavery which was influenced by the rights discourse of the time, the British too were showing little empathy for those without rights, still regarding Africans as inferior or as "child races."<sup>79</sup> I read Hunt's book expecting at every page turn to find mention of South Africa but was left wanting, musing hopefully that as Hunt had argued that to look at rights was to look at the history of the world, she must have made a conscious decision to exclude mention of South Africa. Bonny Ibhawoh's review of Hunt's book concludes:

By limiting a discussion on the "Invention of human rights" to the history of the western world, Hunt lends credence to the construction of human rights as

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<sup>75</sup> James E. Barcus, ed., *Shelley: The Critical Heritage* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 1.

<sup>76</sup> André Franta, *Romanticism and the Rise of the Mass Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>77</sup> Barcus, ed., *Shelley: The Critical Heritage*, 36.

<sup>78</sup> Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History*, 23.

<sup>79</sup> Earl Buxton quoted by the Rev Z R Mahabane, President of the ANC in African National Congress, "The ANC and the Bill of Rights: 1923 to 1993. A Seventy Year Survey," accessed May 10, 2008, <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/billorts.html> (site reconstituted; page no longer available).

something invented in the West and exported to the rest of the world. Unless used figuratively, the term “invention” clearly gets in the way of a full historical understanding of the complex cross-cultural processes by which human rights ideas have evolved.<sup>80</sup>

As Serote alludes the invention of a notion of a democratic South Africa became the work of all those opposing apartheid.<sup>81</sup> If rights need to be imagined or invented, whether in literature or in declarations, let us broaden this discussion to include an alternative history of rights which ultimately informs the very notion of the construction of a rights agenda.

In a wonderfully stirring speech to the ANC in 1921, the president Rev Z R Mahabane fumed as the British rejected the degradation of legislation which would in effect make exiles of the black population within South Africa, the British expressing paternalistic ideas of Africans as children. Here the notion of rights incorporates the idea of responsibilities:

They have carried this to a logical conclusion by denying us the rights, privileges and responsibilities of manhood ... I refuse to submit to the unreasonable humiliation of a great historic people. I emphatically refuse to submit or subscribe to this policy of treating men of maturer years as children or youths . . . And thus as children, we have no voice in the affairs of the country . . . The African will then be relegated to a position of an alien or political slave in his own country.<sup>82</sup>

Rights theorists continue to argue cases for pluralistic versus universal notions of rights but the tendency in recent years has been to examine the application of pluralistic rights within a social framework which draws on universal principles. As nations became independent or declared their independence, they had to decide whether to accept the rights previously denied them by colonial governments or apply their own universal or particularist definitions of rights. Thus the UN Universal Declaration has been given immense symbolic value for its universal notions of natural rights, but these only gain substance when applied to political and civil rights. Subsequent International Covenants (such as the 1966 Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and on Civil and Political Rights) as well as numerous other more specific treaties, obligations, resolutions, reports of special committees and so forth expand on the declaration. At the level of rights discourse, in virtually every session of the UN since 1945 to the ending of apartheid in 1994, members made reference back to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with regard to racial discrimination and apartheid in South Africa. As a document its symbolic value was immense; however the practical reality was that successive South African governments before 1994 ignored the Declaration.

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<sup>80</sup>Bonny Ibhawoh, “Review of 'Inventing Human Rights: A History by Lynn Hunt',” *International Affairs* 83, no. 6 (2008).

<sup>81</sup> Serote, *History Is the Home Address*.

<sup>82</sup> African National Congress, “The ANC and the Bill of Rights: 1923 to 1993. A Seventy Year Survey.”

This tension was tested in one of the first appeals to the newly-formed UN in 1946 when its founding Charter was called into question by the South Africans. The government of India brought a complaint about the racial discrimination against Indians in South Africa to the UN. This complaint with little variation became a separate agenda item at annual UN assemblies until 1961. (Even after the partition of India, representation continued jointly from the governments of India and Pakistan. From 1961 the Indian government complaint was discussed together with agenda items on apartheid.) As founding members of the UN, the South Africans argued that the Charter had not existed in the period for which the complaint was made and therefore could not be binding. They would not accept the notion of universal or natural rights. Other members of the UN rejected this sophism arguing that as a signatory to the founding Charter South Africa was bound by its principles and that while the validity of India's claim could be debated, the universal principles implied in the statements on rights could not be.

There will always be questions about the legitimacy and application of international law in the national sphere. South Africa challenged the core idea of a symbolic document by claiming that its resolutions were not binding on member states as "The United Nations was not a world government; it was an organization for co-operation among sovereign States within the limits of the Charter."<sup>83</sup> Just as the UN declaration could not ensure an end to apartheid in South Africa, a constitutional bill of rights does not necessarily ensure all citizens are granted "basic human rights" as defined. In Tanzania the death penalty was a feature of law in spite of a Bill of Rights which upholds the right to life. So universal principles and legislative enactment do not necessarily sit together easily in the human rights arena. Early on in South Africa Gandhi's concern lay with civil rights for South African Indians whereas other black movements had a broader perspective which included a focus on political rights. The current South African Bill of Rights embeds civic and political rights as universal notions of rights into the law of the land and applies the historical passage of rights to the specific (particular) historical circumstances which gave birth to this enlightened Constitution. The constitution reminds us that there can be diversity and unity with both protected by law.

As we have seen in previous chapters, South Africans have a long history of resistance to oppression. Albie Sachs was concerned that an anti-apartheid mentality (framed by apartheid) had led to the production of sloganistic, political poetry during the apartheid years and deliberately set out to ask writers to step outside that sphere of resistance and to imagine (invent?) a world where there was democratic equality for all.

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<sup>83</sup> United Nations, *Yearbook of the United Nations* (1955), 71.

In “universal” rights declarations “freedom” was invariably seen as a natural, fundamental principle with land and political rights and equality of opportunity being the means of achieving such freedom. A result of the early declarations of rights was to determine the extent to which these would be enacted and legitimized within society and to define who was included or excluded or exiled from these rights. The South African Constitution clearly states: “No one may be subjected to slavery, servitude or forced labour.”<sup>84</sup> This unequivocal statement is missing from the American constitution. All these principles somehow disappear for those in exile, whether the condition is imposed or not, and so the word stateless is borne, used initially to denote being without a “state or political community.”<sup>85</sup> In 1930 stateless appears with a new meaning, “not being a citizen of any state; having no nationality.”<sup>86</sup> Being without a state can mean a denial of basic rights, a suspension or detention on an island somewhere awaiting a bureaucratic, processing nightmare or torture or interrogation, a “state of exclusion.”<sup>87</sup>

Darby contends that debate about the relationship of American liberalism to black oppression is characterized by an indifference to the issue altogether which thus allows the principles of rights to be exploited in the cause of either black oppression or black emancipation.<sup>88</sup> Following the American Declaration of Independence those eschewing the notion of universal rights enshrined in the Declaration could argue that rights did not apply to all people and could thus uphold principles of equality by narrowing the scope of rights, thereby asserting that some people were superior to others. Presenting a case in favour of locating the notion of rights within social practice, Derby asserts:

In a society where certain ways of acting or being treated – whether morally justifiable or not – are not recognised and enforced by the highest political authority, individuals unable to act in these ways, or not protected from being treated in certain ways, are without rights.<sup>89</sup>

In other words not to act according to certain principles excludes individuals from society. Negatives deny them: the non-entitlements, the restrictions, the dispossession, the assertion of differences . . . The current South African Bill of Rights recognises that political authorities and legislation enforce and protect those factors identified in the Bill and thus have a duty to ensure that social practice constitutes what is meant by rights. There has by necessity

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<sup>84</sup> Constitutional Assembly of South Africa, “Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996,” No. 13.

<sup>85</sup> Simpson, ed., *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Giorgio Agamben *Means without Ends: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

<sup>88</sup> Derrick Darby, *Rights, Race and Recognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 111.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

been a huge legislative shift in South Africa based on constitutional reform; however, it will take a long time to change social practice based on a century of exclusion from both pluralistic and universal definitions of rights. The Bill of Rights is written in positive, assertive language based on inclusion rather than exclusion.

Nesbitt notes that “The common feature of all modern dissidence is the focus on universal human rights and the rule of law.”<sup>90</sup> He defines dissidence in terms of a rejection of the normative practices of law which prevent the agency of such rights. The social sphere, not the individual, becomes colonized, he argues, and as such “the term colony refers to the failure of a population to bring to fruition the process of democratization.”<sup>91</sup> While we might take issue with the way this is expressed the idea of rejecting the concept of having been ‘colonized’ was the foundation of the philosophies of dissidence of Aimé Césaire, Franz Fanon and Steve Biko. As early as 1848 the French extended the vote to citizens of Gorée and Saint Louis in Senegal, but in 1961 Fanon was to argue that the ongoing acceptance of French law in effect resulted in colonization of the mind. Fanon had a profound impact on the black consciousness movement in South Africa as well as on Robert Sobukwe’s Pan-African movement. The confluences of global cultural exchange continue with Breyten Breytenbach, one of the poets discussed in chapter 7, becoming Executive Director of the Gorée Institute in Senegal in 2009 and lecturing in both New York and Cape Town.

Dissidence has taken many forms in Africa and usually the notion of rights is present. Commonly the words used to expand on rights are democracy, humanism, equality, freedom, liberation, social transformation and unity. The ANC Youth League interpreted dissidence as Shelley did, as a call to action. In the 1940s the League made a conscious decision to propel the ANC into a more active and dissident direction thus placing the particular localized normative framework within the language of universal rights. Steve Biko very consciously applied the idea of dissidence to that of universal rights in the sense of what it means to be human and liberated. By evoking the need for unity amongst black South Africans Biko wrote:

We have set out on a quest for true humanity, and somewhere on the distant horizon we can see the glittering prize. Let us march forth with courage and determination, drawing strength from our common plight and our brotherhood. In time we shall be in a position to bestow upon South Africa the greatest gift possible – a more human face.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Nick Nesbitt, “Departmentalization and the Logic of Decolonization,” *L’Esprit Créateur* 47, no. 1 (2007), 37.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>92</sup> Steve Biko, “Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity,” in *I Write What I Like* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1987), 98.

He asserted the need for black action on the economic and cultural front. Biko's death was to add to a new level of dissidence in South Africa that would eventually lead to the formation of the Mass Democratic Movement and to the end of apartheid. Before his death Biko was working to unite the various streams of black opposition within South Africa. He believed fundamentally in enacting material changes among black South Africans through "activity not activism."<sup>93</sup>

### **South African Influences on Rights Discourse**

For the purpose of this section, I will be following Darby and Nesbitt in regarding rights discourse as a framework of universal statements which depend on normative social and legal practices for their interpretation and application. Due to the failures of governments to observe these notions of rights in South Africa in the twentieth-century, the rights discourse became the dissident discourse written in opposition to the prevailing legal framework of the country.

The ANC was one of many active groups within South Africa working against apartheid. These were local church groups, trade unions, teachers' federations, health clinics and so on. Inkatha, a Zulu group, was founded in the 1920s to oppose the Native Affairs Bill. SPROCAS, the Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society established in the 1970s, published reports which gave impetus to the establishment of Ravan Press, the main anti-apartheid publishing vehicle in the 1970s. However as an influential organization within South Africa, the ANC has a long history and I am, to a certain extent, privileging this history in the rights discourse due to the association many exiled poets and writers have had with the ANC. I will also briefly discuss the Black Consciousness movement and their ideas about human rights and creativity as well as the role of trade unions. There is no doubt that black consciousness poets contributed enormously to human rights discourse and change in South Africa. What I am not discussing are the important contributions to human rights discourse and to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission by church groups and church leaders such as the Reverend Desmond Tutu who, over many years, presented a deadly humorous and biting criticism of the absurdity and reality of apartheid to the outside world, with some effect. Many of these groups worked with the ANC.

The ANC was founded by Pixley Ka Izaka Seme in 1912, two years after the formation of the Union of South Africa and about thirty years after the British defeated the last ruling chiefs in the east of South Africa. As we have seen John Dube, an educator and Zulu poet, was its first

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<sup>93</sup> Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane, Bavusile Maaba, and Nkosinathi Biko, "The Black Consciousness Movement," in *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Volume 2, 1970-1980*, ed. South African Democracy Education Trust (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2004-2009), 100.

President. Interestingly women were excluded from full membership of the ANC until 1943, with the ANC Women's League holding its first conference in the momentous year of 1948. Even in 1991 the status of women within the new South Africa was a contested one.

The writer Sol Plaatje became the ANC's first Secretary-General. Seme was president of the ANC from 1930 to 1936. The founders and presidents of the ANC were products of different backgrounds and as such there was a range of ideological opinion about whether to negotiate with, or resist, the Afrikaner leadership. This diversity finds its way into the poetry of these years. Nevertheless the general thrust of the ANC was to work for civil rights for black South Africans focusing primarily on land and wages. The ANC had a defined structure long pre-dating both the UN and the Organization of African Unity. Initially the ANC had more in common with, and was influenced by, civil rights movements in the United States often due to the influence of American missions or the educational backgrounds of early ANC leaders. But very quickly the particular legislative tenor of South Africa was to propel the movement towards adopting a universal rights language within proscribed local frameworks.

Seme, a barrister, was born in Natal and later educated at Columbia and Oxford. He set up a law practice in Johannesburg in 1910 but racial discrimination and the general living conditions of black South Africans shocked him into action. He felt that only by bringing together people with different tribal or linguistic backgrounds could a movement be formed to fight discrimination:

Chiefs of royal blood and gentlemen of our race, we have gathered here to consider and discuss a scheme which my colleagues and I have decided to place before you. We have discovered that in the land of their birth, Africans are treated as hewers of wood and drawers of water. The white people of this country have formed what is known as the Union of South Africa - a union in which we have no voice in the making of laws and no part in their administration. We have called you, therefore, to this conference, so that we can together devise ways and means of forming our national union for the purpose of creating national unity and defending our rights and privileges.<sup>94</sup>

Thus from its inception the ANC (initially South African Native National Congress) was established to protect the diminishing rights and privileges of all black South Africans. Although largely dormant in the 1930s, the ANC was also informed by leaders with a tradition of publishing in indigenous languages and editing newspapers. Working within a missionary framework, Dube was influenced by Booker T. Washington's work in promoting civil rights for black Americans and for educating teachers to understand the needs of black pupils. Dube could

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<sup>94</sup> R.V. Seloape Thema, "How Congress Began," accessed August 17, 2010, <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?include=docs/arts/1953/arts0725.html>.

see parallels in South Africa with its already vast educational inequalities based on race. Both the school Dube founded in Ohlange and his newspaper *Ilanga laseNatali* still function today.

Two prominent American figures involved in the drafting of declarations for human rights in the early twentieth-century were W.E.B. du Bois and Marcus Garvey. Garvey was instrumental in providing support for disenchanted American Blacks through his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) with its separatist agenda and a belief in a free Africa. The organization's "Declaration of Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World" of 1920 issued fifty-four statements of equality for black people of the world. Washington and du Bois differed philosophically over the nature of the rights they sought for black Americans with Washington falling short of calling for immediate full equality before the law. Both men influenced South African black leaders in considering negotiation with whites over rejection and resistance. When Gandhi embarked on his campaign of passive resistance in South Africa, Dube was to regard his stance with awe:

Trembling at the cruelty of those white men that I had witnessed and amazed at the Himalayan firmness of the Indians, I walked away..." But Mr. Pearson, we will be totally ruined if I ask my people to follow this path.<sup>95</sup>

Dube thus chose the path of negotiation to the distress of some later leaders of the ANC.

The language and practice of how to write the rights discourse in South Africa was informed by these views as well as by a focus on Africa as a unifying force for diasporic and African Blacks. Harrell<sup>96</sup> has called this rhetoric the "Anti-Apartheid Jeremiad," interpreting Mandela and Biko's public speeches as biblical-like lamentations similar to what is called the American Jeremiad movement of social change for Blacks. This description is very useful in identifying the uplifting and optimistic tone of these speeches but limiting in terms of the broader influences on both public figures.

The term Pan-African was first used in 1900 when a gathering of black intellectuals in London decided to address issues of colonialism and racism. W. E. B. du Bois was involved in the beginnings of the Pan-African movement, five meetings of which were held before 1948. Du Bois drafted his "To the nations of the world"<sup>97</sup> speech in which he specifically called for

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<sup>95</sup> E.S. Reddy, "Mahatma Gandhi and John Dube," accessed May 1, 2009, <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/people/gandhi/4.html>.

<sup>96</sup> Willie J. Harrell, "'We Shall Crush Apartheid': Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko and the Rhetoric of the South African Anti-Apartheid Jeremiad," *Ethnicity and Race in a Changing World: A Review Journal* 1, no. 1 (Winter, 2009).

<sup>97</sup> W.E.B. du Bois, "To the Nations of the World," in *My Life and Work* by Alexander Walters (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co, 1917), 257-60.



recognition of the rights of “people of African descent.”<sup>98</sup> In this speech, du Bois predicted that in the twentieth-century skin colour would be “the basis of denying to over half the world the right of sharing to their utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilization.”<sup>99</sup> In 1921 the Congress adopted the London Manifesto or “Declaration to the world” which called for self-government from colonial rule. Du Bois was later to become an advisor to the US delegation involved in the founding of the United Nations Organization.

From its inception, Garvey, du Bois and the Pan-African movement represented not only African colonies but also the diasporic history of many Blacks from all over the world. Their rights declarations were already based on exclusion, colonialism having enforced certain lesser privileges on colonial subjects. By 1943 the ANC had formulated a very specific Bill of Rights. The demands of the document concentrated on how to ensure equality of access to education, trades, professions and housing and urged the repeal of discriminatory legislation. Such was the legacy of inequality that the current South African Constitution has had to include key social exclusions, which are considered fundamental in any society, as guaranteed rights for all South Africans. This Bill is clearly addressed to South Africans and was written by individuals representing a broad cross-section of black organizations including trade unions and teachers federations and associations. This inclusiveness was reflected in the 1996 drafting of the Constitution and was informed by the diversity of voices also reflected in the poems written during this period.

The fifth meeting of the Pan-African Congress was held in Manchester in 1945 and its representatives included Nkrumah, Kenyatta, the writer Peter Abrahams from the ANC as well as representatives from French West Africa. This meeting drafted a statement to push for equality of rights and an end to racial discrimination. The Pan-African movement was to influence the ANC especially in the early years when Marcus Garvey’s philosophy had support in local groups within the ANC. Even the Africanists under Anton Lembede, the founder of the ANC Youth League adopted an “Africa for the Africans” approach. After Lembede’s death, the ANC Youth League’s official policy was a rejection of Garvey’s radical and racially-based nationalism preferring a more “moderate” approach: “We are not against the European as a human being,”<sup>100</sup> states the 1948 policy document of the ANC Youth League. There was always awareness of a humanistic approach to the rights discourse within the ANC. Robert Sobukwe, who joined the

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 257.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> National Executive Committee of the ANC Youth League, “ANC Youth League Basic Policy Document 1948,” accessed April 11, 2009, <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?include=docs/pol/1948/ancylpolr.html>.

ANC Youth league in 1948, rejected this regarding all whites as oppressors: “We regard them all as shareholders in the S.A. Oppressors Company (Pty.) Ltd.”<sup>101</sup> Subukwe formed the Pan-African Congress in 1959. Taking its influences from Nkrumah, the Pan-African Congress went on to influence the South African black consciousness movement of Steve Biko.

The idea of European unity was written into the Constitution of the French Fourth Republic in 1946. Senegal’s poet and president-to-be Leopold Senghor was elected as a Deputy to the Assembly as was the poet Aimé Césaire, thereby consolidating the role of two poets in the drafting of the new constitution. Senghor represented the new party Bloc Africain and became the official grammarian to the constitution. He favoured a unified approach to government in West Africa. This ideal of unity, namely social, economic and political cooperation, failed in practice yet Senghor went on in his poetry to explore the notion of unitary rights. Césaire, however, adopted a different approach. He believed that the colonized had “to develop their singularity beyond mere inwardness”<sup>102</sup> in a call to a negotiated relationship between the self and the colonized. This sentiment directly influenced Jean-Paul Sartre and indirectly Derrida, and also informs the poetry of exiled South Africans as it does many other poets from various countries around the globe.

Although there was a military wing of the ANC, Umkhonto we Sizwe, the language of official policy documents was tempered to generate a broad popular consensus among the majority of the population. This is the very appeal of some human rights documents yet paradoxically motherhood statements are meaningful beyond words when their meaning, in practice, is non-existent: “basic human rights” became more than basic for those deprived of legislative and social rights under apartheid. Exclusion from human rights makes charters, manifestos, declarations all the more hopeful in their intent and in their appeal to our common sense.

Until the 1940s, the ANC was perceived to be lacking a focused direction. Black South Africans fought alongside whites in the Second World War even though increasingly repressive legislation in South Africa only further excluded Blacks from rightful participation in the freedoms for which they were supposedly fighting. In a move that was to be echoed in the 1980s, a younger generation anticipated a change in direction by opening up the ANC to a broader struggle which would work actively within the community. Founded by Lembede at the University of Fort Hare in 1944, the ANC Youth League gave impetus to the newly revived

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<sup>101</sup> Robert Sobukwe, “Future of the Africanist Movement.’ Questions and Answers R. M. Sobukwe, in the Africanist, January 1959” accessed June 30, 2008, [http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/library-resources/interviews/1959\\_interview-sobukwe.htm](http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/library-resources/interviews/1959_interview-sobukwe.htm).

<sup>102</sup> Nesbitt, “Departmentalization and the Logic of Decolonization,” 39.

ANC. Among its members were Sisulu, Mandela and Tambo. As mentioned earlier, Tambo and Mandela had been expelled from the University of Fort Hare for starting a student protest, and all three saw evidence of the increasingly repressive legislation surrounding them. Four major factors propelled them towards a more active agenda: primarily evidence of unjust social practice, Gandhi's passive resistance in India, trade union activism in South Africa and the rise of African nationalism elsewhere on the continent. In 1944 the Youth League published a manifesto with a creed and a three-year plan and by 1948 had a Basic Policy Document which was adopted by the ANC in 1949. By this stage the Youth League was the dominant force within the ANC.

The 1944 statement of policy uses the language of rights and stresses national unity while the 1948 document focuses on an agenda of economic, educational and cultural reform to achieve this unity. The Youth League stated their intention to create a national liberation movement with the aim of bringing democracy not just to South Africa but to other nations within Africa as well.

The Statement of Intent declares:

The African regards Civilisation as the common heritage of all Mankind and claims as full a right to make his contribution to its advancement and to live free as any White South African; further, he claims the right to all sources and agencies to enjoy rights and fulfil duties which will place him on a footing of equality with every other South African racial group.<sup>103</sup>

The document stresses the organic unity sought by black South Africans: "communal contentment is the absolute measure of values. His [sic] philosophy of life strives towards unity and aggregation; towards greater social responsibility"<sup>104</sup> as opposed to "the Race destiny; that is the belief that the White race is the destined ruler and leader of the world for all time."<sup>105</sup> The league adopted the motto "Africa's cause must triumph" thus locating the struggle firmly within Africa.

Conscious of the changing world political landscape, the ANC proclaimed its Constitution in 1943 and at its conference released a statement on "African claims in South Africa," which included "The Atlantic Charter from the Standpoint of Africans within the Union of South Africa" and a "Bill of Rights."<sup>106</sup> With these documents the ANC was to signal its entry

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<sup>103</sup> Provisional Committee of the ANC Youth League, "ANC Youth League Manifesto - 1944," accessed April 11, 2009, <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?include=docs/manifesto/1944/ancylmany.html>.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> African National Congress, "The Atlantic Charter from the Standpoint of Africans within the Union of South Africa and Bill of Rights," February 16th, 2009,

into the world arena with a rights discourse. The UN would increasingly see its members debate the “problem” of South Africa’s outright rejection of the notion of universal and pluralistic applications of rights philosophies.

Support for du Bois and two other black delegates advising the US representatives at the formation of the UN in 1945 came from various organizations within the United States including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Council of African Affairs. The latter was chaired by Paul Robeson who was described by Nelson Mandela during his years of imprisonment as “our hero.”<sup>107</sup> Their proposals urged an end to colonialism as well as that “participating governments should grant “the same economic, social, cultural, legal and political rights” to everybody.<sup>108</sup> The British meanwhile had denied the right of any of their African colonists to attend the San Francisco Conference in 1945 to set up the UN. On 26<sup>th</sup> June 1945, fifty nations signed the UN Charter.<sup>109</sup> Under General Jan Smuts, South Africa sent representatives to both this and the Paris Peace Conference of 1946. The ANC’s President-General Dr. A. X. Zuma, aware of differences between Churchill and Roosevelt, urged the leaders to:

formulate a comprehensive statement embodying an African Charter, and  
(b) (*sic*) to draw up a Bill of Rights which Africans are demanding as essential to guarantee them a worthy place in the post war world.<sup>110</sup>

The ANC position on the Atlantic Charter reads as a forceful and thoughtful document which stands now as a symbol of choice for other nations. The document was written for an international and local white audience and was also aimed at directly addressing the basic needs of the majority population in South Africa while simultaneously looking outwards to Africa at large for support. And while the world moved in the direction of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, partially authored by General Jan Smuts, South Africa was to move in the opposite direction.

The relationship of the UN to South Africa is significant in the history of both the organization and the country. South Africa was to occupy much UN business over a quarter of a

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<http://www.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv01538/04lv01600/05lv01609/06lv01610.htm>.

<sup>107</sup> Tom Lodge, *Mandela: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>108</sup> Marika Sherwood, ““There Is No New Deal for the Blackman in San Francisco’: African Attempts to Influence the Founding Conference of the United Nations, April-July 1945,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 29, no. 1 (1996), 78.

<sup>109</sup> Symbolically, the Congress of the People signed the Freedom Charter on June 26<sup>th</sup> ten years later in 1955.

<sup>110</sup> Thomas Karis and Gwendolen M. Carter, *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1990*, vol. 2 (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press 1972-<c1997), doc 29b.

century with poets such as the South African Dennis Brutus making representations to the UN on the issue of boycotts of South African sports participation in the world. South Africa's rejection of the Universal Declaration was a challenge to the authority of the UN.

A hint of Britain's ambiguity in relation to the application of the UN declaration to South Africa was apparent in Britain's refusal to extend the principles of the Atlantic Charter to countries outside Europe, in other words to British colonies. Roosevelt acquiesced to Churchill's concerns over India and the so-called Atlantic Charter was promulgated for European nations only who would be able to demand self-determination and self-government. The UN adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Paris in 1948. Sherwood<sup>111</sup> maintains that no history of the founding of the UN mentions the attempts of those living under colonialism or racism to have their injustices raised at the UN.

Of fifty-five member states of the UN in 1946/47 only three were from Africa: Egypt, Ethiopia and South Africa, and only the first two were signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

South Africa did not endorse this declaration: in May 1948 the first Nationalist Party government was elected in South Africa having campaigned on the notion of apartheid-separateness. South Africa had set itself on a collision course with the very declaration that formed the UN, of which the Smuts government had been one of only twenty-six signatories. We have seen that as early as 1946/47, the Indian government claimed that South Africa's treatment of Indians contravened the founding Charter: "the Union Government's discriminatory treatment of Asiatics in general and Indians in particular on the grounds of their race constitutes a denial of human rights and fundamental freedom and is contrary to the Charter." The South African representative to the UN argued that political rights were not "fundamental" while the UN disagreed, arguing that its founding Charter meant a renunciation of particular sovereignty as applied to certain rights embodied within the Charter. In particular the Charter meant the cessation of racial discrimination among member states.

Some members of the new South African Government of 1948 were part of the *Ossewabrandwag* which had supported Hitler during the war while others were members of the *Broederbond* (Band of Brothers) who had active ties with the Nazis. The language of both groups was characterized by references to God, destiny, separation of non-whites and the glory of the Afrikaans language and Afrikaners. Much of this language and these sentiments were incorporated into the first constitution of South Africa when it became a republic in 1961.

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<sup>111</sup> Sherwood, "There Is No New Deal for the Blackman in San Francisco': African Attempts to Influence the Founding Conference of the United Nations, April-July 1945," 71.

Although the same words, for example “destiny” and “divine,” appear in the Youth League’s 1948 policy document, in this treatise there are the first steps towards an inclusive notion of rights for all people of Africa as subsequently reflected in the current Constitution of South Africa: “In such a true democracy all the nationalities and minorities would have their fundamental human rights guaranteed in a democratic Constitution.”<sup>112</sup> Such a Constitution would promote African nationalism: “The African has a primary, inherent and inalienable right to Africa which is his continent and Motherland, and the Africans as a whole have a divine destiny which is to make Africa free among the peoples and nations of the earth.”<sup>113</sup> Here we see the foundations of the ANC’s future policy on culture. These are ideals which appear in the poetry of exiled South Africans; European influences, African identities expressed through African culture and civilization, reflections of conflict and turmoil as well as beauty. The Youth League urged that these ideals be put to the service not just of liberation but also of progress.

The treatment of Indians in South Africa was raised repeatedly at the first, second, third, fifth, sixth and seventh sessions of the UN, thus ensuring that the problem of racism in South Africa was kept alive on agendas of UN meetings. As a result the UN set up a three-person committee designed to implement resolution 616 A and B (VII) of the UN charter with respect to South Africa. Not surprisingly the South Africans refused to cooperate. The South Africans used the same argument they had used to defend the charge of unfair treatment of Indians: that the UN had no jurisdiction over South Africa or its legislation. The Indian delegation continued to draw attention to South Africa’s violation of the UN Declaration. Resolution 719 (VIII), supported by the United States with Australia and Great Britain abstaining, called for further negotiations between the two parties based on the conflict between racial discrimination and the Universal Declaration. The report of the Commission into “the question of race conflict in South Africa resulting from the policies of apartheid of the Government of the Union of South Africa,”<sup>114</sup> concluded that it “was absolutely incontestable with regard to general questions concerning human rights and particularly those rights of protection against discrimination for reasons of race, sex, language or religion” (187). And that apartheid was “fundamentally irreconcilable with humane thinking” (187). Ultimately however the UN decided that a whole range of civil functions were “among matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of a Member State”(187), thus rendering the commission’s work to mere observer status and leaving

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<sup>112</sup> National Executive Committee of the ANC Youth League, “ANC Youth League Basic Policy Document 1948.”

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> United Nations, *Yearbook of the United Nations (1946-2005)* (New York: United Nations, 1953), 187. Further citations of this work are given in the text.

the majority people of South Africa to the hands of a minority government. The nature of humanism and its meaning was raised in relation to human rights when the Syrian representative called South African policies: “an affront to true European humanism. The degradation caused by South Africa's racial policies could not be defended in the name of European civilization”; and that “respect for human rights was a universally accepted principle and required no legal force to be binding on all”(187). Canada, however, questioned whether or not “the Assembly had absolute powers to deal with questions of human rights. That argument might create a dangerous tendency to attempt to impose the will of groups of nations on others and to encroach upon individual sovereignty” (187). This problem still stalks the UN today in its attempt to influence national legislation.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> June 1955, after years of running a “Campaign of Defiance Against Unjust Laws,” opposition groups in South Africa held a large multi-racial gathering to endorse the ANC’s Freedom Charter. The Charterists believed that this document would contain the guiding principles of what was by now clearly seen as the liberation movement. A further intention in holding this Congress of the People was to make representation to the UN as it continued to attempt to implement Resolution 719. The UN reported on the Freedom Charter during its tenth session in 1955 and the document continued to be a focal point for resolutions against South Africa made in subsequent years. The document contained very particular points of social practice which required action and resonated with millions of disenfranchised people. At the same time it inspired the drawing up of similar charters elsewhere in Africa. Thus national unity became a predominant theme in the move towards a constitution based on a multi-racial South Africa. South Africans agreed that rights should be socially normative and that although such a framework should be free of government, rights ultimately belonged to the people. There would be no rights which belonged only to particular groups such as a white minority. Ethnic or racial division was written out of the new constitution.

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## Chapter 6: Poets to the People

A poem speaks to anyone who does not share the singularity of the experience...it says, migrates all over, like language.

Jacques Derrida, "Shibboleth: For Paul Celan"

The writers and critics writing within the context of organized resistance movements comprehend the role of culture and cultural resistance as part of the larger struggle for liberation.

Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature*

The poet knows his duty  
whatever is past, whatever ahead  
he must sing on and on  
without obedience to the living  
or enslavement to the dead.

David Evans, "Poet and Guerrilla"

This section plunges into the spaces between exile, altruism and human rights and looks at how an examination of the language and poetry of South African exiles can illuminate the human rights agenda in South Africa during the apartheid years. For whom were the poets in exile writing? How were they published and who was their readership? As discussed previously terms such as "protest poetry"<sup>1</sup> or "poetry of resistance"<sup>2</sup> have been used for many years to describe poetry which expresses opposition to apartheid. Even literary criticism has been called "solidarity criticism."<sup>3</sup> In 1991 the apparent about-turn by Albie Sachs of the ANC who wrote "we should ban ourselves from saying that culture is a weapon of struggle"<sup>4</sup> stimulated immense discussion in South Africa about the relationship between politics and literature, provoking this response from Es'kia Mphahlele: "I am in no mood whatsoever to enter this debate at this time. Reason: I have been in it since the 1950s."<sup>5</sup> The word "exile" is everywhere in discussion of South African writing and politics. To see culture in this period as primarily "a weapon of struggle" does not do justice to the complexity of the dialogue between poets and their audiences, nor to notions of exile and definitions of human rights. The complex history of the contribution of this dialogue to political change and to the publication of South Africa's Constitutional Bill of Rights in 1996 cannot be simplified into a phrase about culture nor to the

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<sup>1</sup> Shava, *A People's Voice: Black South African Writing in the Twentieth-Century*, 29.

<sup>2</sup> Brown and van Dyk, eds., *Exchanges: South African Writing in Transition*, ix.

<sup>3</sup> Sachs, "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom: Culture and the ANC Constitutional Guidelines," 187.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>5</sup> Brown and van Dyk, eds., *Exchanges: South African Writing in Transition*, x.



meanings ascribed to rights in everyday social practice in South Africa. We should note the subtitle to Sachs' paper: *Preparing ourselves for Freedom, Culture and the ANC Constitutional Guidelines*.

Here we look at the way our assumptions of exile are challenged by South African poets while constructing a picture of how this poetry informs historical and contemporary debate on human rights. In so doing, we move away from my chapters on theoretical approaches to South African literature towards a look at how poetry has construed human rights in the altruistic and often hopeful dialogue between exiled poets and their audiences.

Together with the poetry of trade unionists, exiled academics and other political exiles or activists, the poetry fostered and published by the ANC and other newsletters and magazines constitutes an archival record of an active exile and underground culture in and outside South Africa from 1948 to 1990. This culture consisted of working individuals and movements who took the idea of rights from the people to the people. This was a significant period in South African history. The 1950s saw the introduction of draconian legislation such as the Suppression of Communism Act as well as stringent censorship provisions, and simultaneously the ANC Youth League revived the strategic role of the ANC as an opposition force. The South African censors were used as political instruments to become both public, moral guardians as well as protectors of the State's definition of literature. This meant that many poets had to flee into exile or were imprisoned, their writing often condemned as aligned to communist or terrorist activities or to provoking violence and opposition to the ideology of the state. The idea of literature was confused with preservation of a particular definition of culture, the culture of apartheid being a righteous Calvinist one which actively gave agency to high literature to protect the morals of a "white" civilization. McDonald describes the Cronjé Commission's report into publication control as "one of the strangest documents in the troubled history of American New Criticism"<sup>6</sup> taking its idea of literature from Cleanth Brooks and René Wellek's formalist approach to the self-contained text. As McDonald points out this was slightly at odds with the politicians who viewed "writing [as] simply a public act like any other."<sup>7</sup>

Poets of this period made poetry into public and performative acts of defiance, a rejection of both a conventional definition of what was termed "literature" as well as a political climate that would read this poetry as a provocative threat to the established political order. These decades involved more than simply an evolving protest poetry. Traditional poetic performance was taken to a much broader audience and the diffusion or deliberate rejection of

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<sup>6</sup> McDonald, *The Literature Police: Apartheid Censorship and Its Cultural Consequences*, 25.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

conventional or “white”<sup>8</sup> literary distinctions became common. This resulted in new literary styles which forcefully acknowledged a critical engagement with political movements of change. There were intense and provocative debates around notions of literature and culture fuelled by the struggle to develop a literary culture representative of the majority population.<sup>9</sup>

Poetry and literary comment were disseminated by performance and publication. Magazines such as *Sechaba* and *Fighting Talk* published articles which were often unavailable for academic study within South Africa as issues were banned by the censors. Poetry became a conveyor of hope, thus a symbol of rights. The privileging of documentation<sup>10</sup> as a means of cultural change and resistance has meant that there is a wealth of material available from what were then underground South African organizations as well as through official apartheid government documents endlessly chronicling what the State considered to be illegal activities.

In this section we return to the words of poets declared “undesirable”<sup>11</sup> by the South African censors. Being in exile was also to have been declared undesirable. The state no longer wanted you within its boundaries. How could poets in exile be considered such an impost on the state apparatus of control? I recommend the impressive publication on South African censorship by Peter McDonald, *The Literature Police*, which provides a detailed history on the role and nature of censorship in South Africa and shows how by the 1980s a few progressive censors came to see some glimmer of literary merit in the protest poetry of the “Poets to the People” movement.<sup>12</sup> I hope to show that being victims of, and exiled within, a carefully constructed oppression based on a separation of cultures gave South Africans in exile an historical obligation to use a performative voice to bear these burdens of exile. The censors’ “evils”<sup>13</sup> became the exiles’ burdens as the censors sought to protect the “European” world of civilization from the “verbal onslaughts” of the protest poetry of the “Third World.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Horst Zander, “Prose-Poem-Drama: 'Proemdra' --- 'Black Aesthetics' Versus 'White Aesthetics' in South Africa,” *Research in African Literatures* 30, no. 1 (Spring, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> See footnote 2. Many publications discuss these debates, one of the most thorough being McDonald’s book.

<sup>10</sup> With the proliferation of publications and multimedia recordings on South African history, many of these documents have been digitized or recorded and are freely available on the web, for example DISA, or through subscriptions to various ongoing indexing services such as NISC. Other documents can be accessed through the many archive collections within South Africa, and NELM has an extensive research facility and archive for scholars of South African literary history. Stanford University Library has an excellent list of South African archives.

<sup>11</sup> McDonald, *The Literature Police: Apartheid Censorship and Its Cultural Consequences*, 22.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

## Planting Hope in Stealth

What kind of poetry was commonly termed “protest poetry”?

The “Power to the People” movement produced poets such as Phahane Selekelo whose writing is redolent with violent dislike of whites, Europe and the Bible, but hopes “the days shall come / the days of harmony and peace,”<sup>15</sup> a constant refrain in the sloganistic poetry promoted by the ANC. Any spirit of reconciliation is absent in many of these poems. An anonymous poem of the same ilk beats the refrain of change:

Until the racist minority regime of Vorster and Smith is totally destroyed  
Until this white supremacy is abandoned...  
Until the colour of the nation is of no significance  
Until the basic human rights are equally guaranteed to all  
.....  
Until that day the African continent will know no peace...<sup>16</sup>

These are words the censor did not want to hear. This declamation takes on the almost evangelical chant and rhythm we find in the sermons of many anti-apartheid preachers. There is knowledge, belief and hope that changes will arrive and a pragmatic<sup>17</sup> intent to bring this about.

Articles in newspapers such as *Fighting Talk* (which ran from 1942 to 1963 when it was banned and was edited at times by ANC activists such as Lionel Bernstein and Ruth First) frequently carried literary comment, for example the issue of January 1963 includes news that Mbari Prizes for Literature had been awarded to, amongst others, the South African journalists Blake Modisane and Arthur Maimane. That year the second poetry prize went to Dennis Brutus while the third prize for poetry was awarded to Arthur Nortje, both of whom I will discuss in the next chapter. The issue carries Brutus’ article entitled *Silent Poets, Strangled Writers* in which he writes:

Among the 102 gagged are journalists.... novelists, short-story writers and poets. All these people have been silenced. They may not utter, print or publish a single word in their own country. If their writings are published outside, the publications on entry into South Africa have to be mutilated and their words torn out.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> P Phahane Selekelo, “The Days Shall Come,” Wits Historical Paper, accessed January 8, 2009, [http://www.disa.ukzn.ac.za/index.php?option=com\\_displaydc&recordID=poe00000000.032.009.796a](http://www.disa.ukzn.ac.za/index.php?option=com_displaydc&recordID=poe00000000.032.009.796a).

<sup>16</sup> “War,” Wits Historical Papers

[http://www.disa.ukzn.ac.za/index.php?option=com\\_displaydc&recordID=poe00000000.032.009.796](http://www.disa.ukzn.ac.za/index.php?option=com_displaydc&recordID=poe00000000.032.009.796).

<sup>17</sup> I use the word pragmatic in the philosophical sense. For these poets, social change can only evolve out of comradeship and solidarity: “the utopian world community envisaged by the Charter of the United Nations and the Helsinki Declaration of Human Rights” is not “the *destiny* of humanity.” *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Richard Rorty, (London: Penguin, 1999), xxxii.

<sup>18</sup> Dennis Brutus, [J.B. Booth, pseud.], “Silent Poets, Strangled Writers,” *Fighting Talk* 17, no. 1 (January, 1963), 7.

Silencing was designed to prevent the spread of seditious literature written by people who defiantly claimed membership of banned organizations. This general climate of repression within which South African writers worked frames the resolute determination of the poets of this period to create their own vibrant literary culture despite the gagging. This was a difficult task requiring dedication and commitment in order to avoid becoming a target of the Security Police or of the censors. Editors and writers fought back. While developing a local and black publishing network became important in the 1970s and 1980s, much earlier many small magazines saw South African writing in a broader context. As many poets were already in exile, there was a determined eclecticism in the literary landscape of the 1950s and 1960s when attempts were made to bring overseas culture to a South African audience; for example *Fighting Talk* published an interview with Krishna Shah, an Asian-American theatre director<sup>19</sup> and a poem, “Santa Isaber” by Leon Damas, one of the founders of the Négritude movement. “Santa Isaber” is a lullaby and a ballad which highlights the lyrical qualities also evident in South African exiled poets Kgositsile, Brutus, and Mphahlele, though the latter two poets used much darker imagery than Damas:

For surely they have lied  
 The tongue is quicker than the tongue [sic]  
 And speech is quicker than the wind  
 And hatred is a galloping horse  
 With her mother my love awaits me  
 My love awaits my return  
 O I shall go to Santa Isaber  
 O I shall see my love.<sup>20</sup>

Mphahlele had a critical view of Négritude poetry and took both the censors and Sartre to task, the former for seeing most black literature as non-literary and Sartre for his “valuing prose above poetry.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed if we contrast Damas’ poem to a poem also about love and oppression written by Molefe Pheto, we find a violence which is not sweetly lyrical. Pheto was detained under the 1967 “Terrorism Act,” “terrorism” being a word possibly more frequently used in South Africa in the 1960s and 1970s than in post 9/11 discourse. His poem prefigures the more brutal and self-critical language of the black consciousness poets.

do you know  
 what love is  
 Whiteman?

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<sup>19</sup> Cecil Williams, “Actors, Audience and the Play,” *Fighting Talk* 15, no. 11 (December/January, 1961/1962).

<sup>20</sup> Leon Damas, “Santa Isaber,” *Fighting Talk* 17, no. 1 (January, 1963), 9.

<sup>21</sup> McDonald, *The Literature Police: Apartheid Censorship and Its Cultural Consequences* .

.....

You owe me for life  
Ten months of love to my daughters,

And also  
you have taught me  
To hate.<sup>22</sup>

Like other writers, Pheto came to politics through theatre in the townships, in Pheto's case Alexandra Township outside Johannesburg. He had studied music in London and had been involved with the Medu Art movement in Botswana. On his return to South Africa, Pheto gave poetry readings through the Mhloti Black Theatre group but his life was thrown into turmoil when he was arrested by South Africa's notorious security police. He spent 281 days in prison, 271 of them in solitary confinement. In his memoirs, Pheto gives a harrowing account of the nightmare of being tortured to reveal who "Mdali"<sup>23</sup> was. In fact MDALI stood for Music, Drama, Arts and Literature Institute, an organization of Sowetan artists founded by Pheto. The experience of torture also gave Pheto an insight into black on black violence which was to shape his future political response to change in South Africa. His house was searched by security police of all skin colours and he watched his precious collection of books being thrown into a heap on the floor: "A little hill of Black-written books, my most beloved possessions...I felt certain that the books and I would never meet again."<sup>24</sup> After reading Pheto's memoir which he wrote almost ten years after his solitary confinement, I find the poems written during his solitary confinement even more remarkable for his ability to cling to an intellectual ideal.

"I am incarcerated / in a victory / of ideas."<sup>25</sup> Pheto read this poem at a memorial service for Steve Biko held in Harlem in 1977, perhaps with Biko's assertion "I write what I like"<sup>26</sup> on his mind. Pheto's words express a hope that despite his suffering at the hands of his "incapable"<sup>27</sup> captors during incarceration, there can still be a victory of ideas. The notion of literature or political activism as social hope has many histories; Rorty calls the utopian ideal of nineteenth-century Europe "the noblest imaginative creation of which we have a record."<sup>28</sup> Yet the European (meaning "white") gaze of the South African censors turned its full glare on the expression of this ideal in South Africa. In the poetry of South Africans in exile, Rorty's

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<sup>22</sup> Molefe Pheto, "Poems: I Came Back; There Is No Sun in Here; When They Come," *Southern Africa* December (1977), 20.

<sup>23</sup> ———, *And Night Fell: Memoirs of a Political Prisoner in South Africa* (Heinemann, 1985), 68-73.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>25</sup> Pheto, "Poems: I Came Back; There Is No Sun in Here; When They Come," 20.

<sup>26</sup> Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like* (Oxford: Heinemann 1987), 19.

<sup>27</sup> Pheto, *And Night Fell: Memoirs of a Political Prisoner in South Africa*, 23.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999), 277.

literature as moral philosophy finds full expression. It was a philosophy fully embraced by many exiled poets and organizations as well as trade unions and black consciousness organizations within South Africa.

Zander approaches the development of South African black aesthetics by examining how literary representation “abstained from producing political or ecclesiastical propaganda”<sup>29</sup> in both eighteenth-century Europe and Africa as literature began to be considered as a genre in its own right. Political black writing continued in a non-fictional form until Sol T. Plaatje’s *Mhudi* and R.R.R. Dhlomo’s *An African Tragedy*, both in the early twentieth-century. Yet as we have seen poetry was already a feature of a black aesthetic and the experience of exile was to solidify this medium as a historically informed and structurally expressive platform for delivering a political message. In addition it was a genre so closely allied to performance, theatre, music and drama that its versatility and portability ensured it a larger audience than the readership of small magazines or poetry publications. “Proemdra”<sup>30</sup> (poetry, prose, drama) represented an act of assertion, not only of political rights, but also of literary ones.

We are going to pee, spit and shit on literary convention before we are through; we are going to kick and push and drag literature into the form we prefer . . . We’ll write our poems in a narrative form; we’ll write journalistic pieces in poetry form; we’ll dramatise our poetic experiences; we’ll poeticise our historical dramas<sup>31</sup>

Mothobi Mutloatse’s statement shows how the exiled poets to the people movement gave poetry its chance to change in the 1980s. Despite the censors’ best efforts, the clandestine and overt protest poetry of the 1960s and 1970s created a sense of confidence and hope in poetry as primarily a medium of communication in much the same way as song had always been in South Africa.

The idea of life itself as hope is a frequent refrain in the poetry of prisoners, exiles and those detained under house arrest. The journal *Fighting Talk* carries this idealism in both its title and articles at a time when South Africa was about to enter one of its darkest political phases. The editorial of the December/January 1961/1962 issue celebrates writers who “have turned their backs on the stagnant, the antiquated and race-ridden”<sup>32</sup> in an ever-hopeful editorial entitled “Writing of the New South Africa.” Indeed the new South Africa had been created and recreated in the imagination long before years of planning were to lead to its political realisation. We gain

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<sup>29</sup> Zander, “Prose-Poem-Drama: ‘Proemdra’ --- ‘Black Aesthetics’ Versus ‘White Aesthetics’ in South Africa,” 13.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>32</sup> Fighting Talk Committee, “Editorial: Writing of the New South Africa,” *Fighting Talk* 15, no. 11 (1961/1962), 1.

an insight into the poetics of altruism in these *Fighting Talk* extracts which remind us of the role of poetry as a purveyor of hope across most cultures during periods of political repression or acts of war:

It is the cactus and the hated flag  
that flourish there: they must not find your hand  
clutching a hope to plant in stealth<sup>33</sup>

rather hope is to be celebrated without “pity... / it will not blossom with its roots of fear.”<sup>34</sup> The cactus symbolises something sharp and barbarous able to survive with the flag as perpetrators of violence. The poem reaches out to other prisoners. In his memoirs, Pheto described how conversations about imprisonment and how to act when imprisoned were common among people always potentially subject to the randomness of arrest. How to act becomes a motif in many exilic poems where the poem itself becomes the means of action. The idea of growth embedded in words informs the notion of change through literature:

we must plant  
We must plant  
Mother  
We must plant  
We must plant.<sup>35</sup>

The image of growth is constantly juxtaposed with the stench of death particularly after torture. To plant is to have hope as opposed to the deadening of the brain through violence: “My brain became / a dead bulb”<sup>36</sup> writes Themba kaMiya,

after the convulsion  
I stood up  
With all lost hope  
Regained  
In my awakening.<sup>37</sup>

The Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) regularly devoted issues of its newsletter *FOSATU Worker News* to cultural issues and held a “Workers Poetry Competition” to encourage the production of poetry. The word “culture” has always been a much contested one, today even being used as a managerial term in organizations. Between 1970 and 1990 “culture” as used in the workforce in South Africa referred to the arts, so that FOSATU could

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<sup>33</sup> Raymond Thoms, “Poem: African Prisoners Arriving in Police Trucks at the Johannesburg Fort, July 1961,” *Fighting Talk* 15, no. 11 (1961/1962), 9.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Marcelino dos Santos, “Poem,” *Southern Africa* 7, no. 10 (1974), 31.

<sup>36</sup> Themba kaMiya, “Revelation” *Rixaka* (1989), 10.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 10.

designate a day a year to “worker culture,”<sup>38</sup> in which there was a celebration of “worker choirs” where “workers will recite their poetry . . . [and] will be performing plays.”<sup>39</sup> In his inaugural lecture of 1986, Tomaselli advocated a role for a people’s culture to reclaim the ideology embedded in the popular culture promoted by the Afrikaans government.<sup>40</sup> Workers’ culture was about “controlling our creativity. We must create space in our struggle – through our songs, our own slogans, our own poems, our own artwork, our own plays and dances... will continually remind you of our struggle for freedom.”<sup>41</sup> The Durban trade union movement played a pivotal role in promoting the union cultural movement onto the national stage so that art, music and poetry became a trajectory of change. The ANC rejected the FOSATU’s bargaining stance believing a more grassroots community approach was necessary for change. Yet FOSATU promoted a cultural agenda whose aims ran parallel to those of the ANC and was successful partially because community activity had a long history in many parts of the country and partially because the political climate within universities promoted workers’ cultural activities (for example the Durban Cultural project ).

In an interview, Mi [sic] Siduma Michael Hlatshwayo said:

I wanted to be a poet, control words, many words... When I left school at standard 7 I cried and cried. I cried because a natural instinct of judging told me that I was not equipped to shape my country into a land of plenty. Yet I still have hope.<sup>42</sup>

The need for education to support literacy was promoted through workers’ cultural groups and also through performance days. Encouraged by FOSATU’s successor COSATU, individual trade unions actively promoted poetry. The National Union of Mineworkers encouraged mining poets to join the cultural work of COSATU and COSAW. The latter played a major role in writing a new cultural agenda for South Africa and organised several important conferences to stimulate discussion of literature for and to all levels of the populace. McDonald discusses the exiled Medu Group’s influence on COSAW in some detail.<sup>43</sup> Many of the worker poems are sloganistic but gentle in their exhortation: in a possible echo of Mao as “our dear leader,” Rakgosi implores “dear fellow workers,” “dear brothers,” “dear comrades,” “dear Africans” not to forget those “Who have lost their lives in the mining accidents” who “became martyrs / For

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<sup>38</sup> FOSATU, “FOSATU Education Workshop-a Day of Worker Culture,” *Fosatu Worker News* 1985, no. Special Edition (1985), 3.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Tomaselli, *A Contested Terrain: Struggle through Culture. Inaugural Lecture Delivered in the University of Natal. Durban, 4 September 1986*, 18.

<sup>41</sup> FOSATU, “FOSATU Education Workshop – a Day of Worker Culture,” 3.

<sup>42</sup> Mi Siduma Michael Hlatshwayo, “Interview,” *FOSATU Worker News* (June 1985), 8.

<sup>43</sup> McDonald, *The Literature Police: Apartheid Censorship and Its Cultural Consequences*, 200-207.



our liberty.”<sup>44</sup> These unions opposed censorship at all levels and supported Medu’s efforts to mobilize poetry by taking it, talking it and performing it to and from the people both inside and outside South Africa. These groups were always aware of the symbiosis between exiles and inziles. Their poetry is based on experience, inevitably tinged with unaccountable violations of rights and humanness.

In 1973 SASO published a memorandum on culture which discussed the importance of culture for the liberation of black South Africans. At this stage Black Consciousness was dominating the thought of many activists and the purpose of culture was “action.” The shadow of Shelley emerged in this tract. For SASO, “poetry and literature [should be] geared at changing the system and liberating the people,”<sup>45</sup> a refrain which resonates in Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry*: “The most unfailing herald, companion and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is Poetry.”<sup>46</sup> Sengor saw Négritude as “a weapon, as an instrument of liberation and as a contribution to the humanism of the twentieth-century.”<sup>47</sup> This is a romantic humanism which also informed an ideal of culture as a weapon in twentieth-century South Africa. Many of SASO’s broadsheets include discussion of poetry, music, song and drama as ways of encouraging young people to work for liberation.<sup>48</sup> Fanon took a different view: culture came second to a realisation of the people’s struggle for liberation.<sup>49</sup> The black man is forever identified as the white man’s other, an exile defined by white skins, until his moment of freedom. Bhaba asks of Fanon: “How can the human world live its difference? How can a human being live Other-wise?”<sup>50</sup> The poets writing to the people were working towards an answer.

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<sup>44</sup> Stephen Rakgosi, “Let Us Not Forget,” *NUM News* July (1989), 15.

<sup>45</sup> South African Students Organisation (SASO), “Culture: A Memorandum,” Wits Historical Papers - Karis/Gerhart Collection, accessed August 29, 2009, [http://www.disa.ukzn.ac.za/index.php?option=com\\_displaydc&recordID=mem19730700.032.009.753](http://www.disa.ukzn.ac.za/index.php?option=com_displaydc&recordID=mem19730700.032.009.753).

<sup>46</sup> Shelley, *The Major Works Including Poetry, Prose and Drama*, 700-701.

<sup>47</sup> Léopold Sédar Senghor, “Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth-century,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 27.

<sup>48</sup> South African Students Organisations (SASO), “Commissions Presented at 3rd General Students’ Council of the South African Student’s Organisation, St. Peter’s Seminary, Hammanskraal, 2-9 July, 1972.,” Wits Historical Papers - Karis/Gerhart Collection, accessed August 29, 2009, [http://disa.nu.ac.za/index.php?option=com\\_displaydc&recordID=rep19720702.032.009.750a..](http://disa.nu.ac.za/index.php?option=com_displaydc&recordID=rep19720702.032.009.750a..)

<sup>49</sup> Franz Fanon, “On National Culture,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994).

<sup>50</sup> Homi Bhabha, “Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 122.

A controversial figure in South Africa today for her outspoken pro-black stance, Christine Douts Qunta was a feminist, one of the militant student activists who worked for SASO and the Black People's Convention in the Western Cape. In 1973 she was forced into exile in Botswana and later left for Sydney, Australia where she studied law in 1979. Her poetry was smuggled out of South Africa. Qunta was subsequently published in several anthologies as well as in a single volume *Hoyi Na! Azania: Poems of an African Struggle* (as we have seen published in Sydney<sup>51</sup>) which was reprinted with a preface by Dennis Brutus.

Qunta deliberately evokes the notion of folk poets in the introduction to her collection. She informs us that the title “is a form of salute used by folk poets who speak Xhosa to draw attention to an audience before delivering their message.”<sup>52</sup> We are immediately engaged in a dialogue with a strong unapologetic voice; lines have no capitals as if we are being invited to join an ongoing conversation. Her opening poem questions the “unswerving blind / trust in irrationality” (“and after countless”) that creates “the daily mournful wails / of a people.” These are the people for whom Qunta wishes to speak. Her poems empathize with her comrades in a mood of defiant pessimism. As she:

cupped the tears  
spiced them with courage  
and let it run into the sea  
the beacon light transported it  
to the island  
(bathed in an aura of gloom)  
the sea said nothing.  
(encounter iii)

Qunta looks across at Robben Island and realizes that “people don't talk about / revolution anymore / only because they know it is with us already” (“the inevitability of revolution”). Her experience with SASO and the steady influence of Steve Biko embedded a belief in black pride in Qunta yet her poems belie a confidence in any movement for change in South Africa. She relies on the storytellers of the streets to remind her of her history but holds on to anger, “it won't be until they are angry” (“The old man was a storyteller”) that the “painful memories. . . shall be declared void.” Perhaps conscious that she too could easily become an exile, Qunta's poem “letter to exiles” is: “a reminder / of the way you have become / part of

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<sup>51</sup> The Australian anti-apartheid movement was particularly active during this period when Brutus also visited the country to promote the sports boycott of South Africa. Numerous groups were established in Australia to fight racism and apartheid and there was an active ANC support group which worked with Community Aid Abroad Southern Africa.

<sup>52</sup> Epigraph. Further citations of this work are given in the text. As the pages are unnumbered, references are to titles of poems.

people's days / as songs of existence / grow on a person's / heart." Qunta exonerates the exiles for their flight while believing in the "inevitability of history . . . [that] evil never reigns timelessly." A unity of genres, songs and poems, merge as the voice of the exile becomes part of the rhythm of the day while Qunta longs for "a new me / a new life / a new culture / that will rewrite / my past / ("don't tell me of despair"). "

Qunta reserves her cynicism rather for her brother who "declares himself not wholly / of this continent / and writes off / poetry to the people / as non-poetry" ("snatches"). In spite of her appeal to a people's poetry, Qunta is not didactic – she starts to experiment with poetic form and is concerned with a disappearing environment, the notion of a redefining, re-forming space, her District Six slowly dissolving into history ("in memory of"). Farred movingly explains how District Six was razed by the apartheid government in the 1960s and transformed from a vibrant Coloured area into a "reminder of coloured loss."<sup>53</sup> These reminders colour Qunta's poetry, her sense of the past eroded by "tourists with clicking tongues / and cameras of hypocrisy" (in memory of"). Qunta fully identified with the black consciousness movement and her poems speak of "the proud black nation" ("Shall my people never be free"), however she too is aware of her defined status as a Coloured in South Africa: "people / who live their whole life / and finally die wanting / to be white" ("if I die"). The nomenclature and promulgation of people as Coloured occurred with the Population Registration Act of 1950 and poets such as Arthur Nortje and Dennis Brutus as well as Richard Rive and Bessie Head had to grapple with issues of identity being outwardly redefined in terms of their physical appearance. Qunta belongs to a later generation where militant defiance is typical of the "poets to the people" movement. She shouts "YOU WERE NOT / NEVER" ("Tiro") on hearing of the murder of SASO founder Abram Onkgopotse Tiro in exile in Botswana, claiming a history and writing a history. Here the language of revolution becomes the poet's tool, perhaps in a didactic manner of which Shelley would never have approved.<sup>54</sup> Although Shelley's utopian ideal was based on another revolution, Qunta, who walks and talks "dreams which sometimes / drip with fear and / feelings . . . / my sanity to breaking point," walked and talked a revolution based on the same principle of fraternity as the French Revolution Shelley so admired. Qunta's commitment led to exile and a long journey until she returned home.

The newsletter *Southern Africa*, published by the anti-apartheid Southern Africa Committee in New York, included extracts from *Malibongwe ANC Women: Poetry is also their*

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<sup>53</sup> Grant Fareed, *Midfielder's Moment: Coloured Literature and Culture in Contemporary South Africa* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000), 42.

<sup>54</sup> David Duff, *Romance and Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

*weapon* which promoted the idea of words as a weapon. The anonymous poem “Ode to Aunt Mary” is a tribute to an ANC activist Mary Moodley and once more uses the rhetorical device of repetition to make a point:

A banned woman  
A banned wife  
A banned black-mother...<sup>55</sup>

Lorato Kumalo in her poem “No more words now” rejects with

scorn your logic though  
that violence begets violence  
when you supply guns and money.

In spite of the tone of sadness, almost depression in the poem, there is hope that South Africa too will have its “Nuremberg [sic] trials / judge the rallies / and weigh Munich.”<sup>56</sup> In a sense this poem is a call to violence and yet the poem itself is the weapon. The state saw this type of poetry as a threat. The exile and bannings of poets, poems and magazines led to a proliferation of small journals, some distributed privately (for example, *Black Review*),<sup>57</sup> resulting in the publication of *Staffrider* in the late 1970s.

### **Prejudicial to the Safety of the State**

Publications inside South Africa promoting poetry tended to be small journals such as *Classic*, *The Purple Renoster*, *Africa South*, *The New Africa*, *Fighting Talk*, *Sechaba*, *Rixaxa* and *Staffrider*, or presses such as Ravan and Donker Press. The poetry published was generally varied and points to the diversity of styles accepted for publication. Some poems had religious overtones; as we have seen many were overtly political. There were other vehicles for publishing poetry: Donker Press was started by Adriaan Donker in 1973 with the express objective of publishing the tremendous output of literature which occurred in the 1970s. Many Donker volumes were subsequently banned. Peter Randall, the first editor of Ravan Press, was himself banned for seven years. Many publishers exercised a form of self-censorship aiming their work generally at a white liberal audience in order to satisfy the censors that they were concerned with literary quality. This changed as oppression intensified and the black consciousness movement gave voice to a rejection of white control of cultural platforms.

So poetry inside South Africa was a vigorous, living entity which breathed life into organizations and was in turn embraced by individuals who could find a means of expression

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<sup>55</sup> “Ode to Aunt Mary,” *Southern Africa* 15, no. 5 (December, 1982), 8.

<sup>56</sup> Lerato Kumalo, “No More Words Now,” *Southern Africa* 15, no. 5 (December, 1982), 9.

<sup>57</sup> McDonald, *The Literature Police: Apartheid Censorship and Its Cultural Consequences*, 133.

denied them in the political structures of society. What follows is a discussion of the censor's reactions to exiled or banned poets to the people.

In 1975 Bernth Lindfors edited a small collection of poems entitled *South African Voices*.<sup>58</sup> A glance down the contents page tells us that all seven poets in the slim volume of thirty-six pages were away from South Africa when the poems were written, either in forced or voluntary exile and all held a position or fellowship, either permanent or visiting, at an American university. While Kgosisile and Serote are perhaps the two poets of this generation in whom the confluence of cultures created truly new discordant and distinct poetic voices, all seven poets have made a significant contribution to poetry, academia and cultural change in both the States and South Africa. Also apparent in this brief collection is a concern for others and a trope of exile. Images combine death with symbols of life, and there are allusions to a hopeful future not yet known and a past of constantly changing memories.

In this way the poetry of South African exiles represents altruistic gestures towards, or trusted encounters with, a hopeful future. These persistent voices of resistance act as symbols of humanness in culture and hence society. This small volume embodies these symbols. Altruistic acts embedded in the process of writing propel these poems into the challenges of post-modernity by compelling us to question the ways in which we place value on language.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> November 1975, the month in which Angola gained independence from Portugal, the South African government declared the collection of poetry *Poets to the People*,<sup>59</sup> published in London, "undesirable" according to sections of the Publications Act 1974 for being:

"indecent or obscene or is offensive or harmful to public morals"<sup>60</sup>  
"harmful to the relations between any sections of the inhabitants of the republic"<sup>61</sup>  
"prejudicial to the safety of the State, the general welfare or the peace and good order."<sup>62</sup>

This collection was produced partly to support two organizations banned in South Africa, the ANC and the International Defence and Aid Fund. The censor E. G. Malan<sup>63</sup> identifies eight poets published in the collection as being exiles: Arthur Nortje (who was already

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<sup>58</sup> Lindfors, ed., *South African Voices*.

<sup>59</sup> Feinberg, ed., *Poets to the People: South African Freedom Poems*. Further citations of this work are given in the text.

<sup>60</sup> *Publications Act, 1974*, Section 47 (2) (a).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, Section 47 (2) (d).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, Section 47 (2) (e).

<sup>63</sup> J.J. Kruger, *Publications Act, 1974. Publication or Object - Application for a Decision/Review*. (Cape Town: Government. Republic of South Africa. Directorate of Publications, 1975). Numerous censors' reports obtained under Freedom of Information and translated by the author.

dead), Dennis Brutus, Barry Feinberg, A. N. C. Kumalo (a pseudonym for Ronnie Kasrils), Mazisi Kunene, Hugh Lewin, Oswald Mtshali, Cosmo Pieterse, Mongane Serote and Scarlet Whitman, and briefly outlines their connections to the South African Communist Party or to imprisonment, sabotage or “dedication to the struggle for freedom.”<sup>64</sup> All poets in the anthology had been published previously, either in journals of the ANC or by established publishers such as Oxford University Press (Mtshali) or Heinemann (Brutus, Nortje, Pieterse). E. G. Malan notes that in the foreword Hugh MacDiarmid expresses solidarity with the contributors to the anthology and uses the phrase “we shall overcome,” an iconic cry of the American civil rights movement then becoming popular in South Africa. An absence of comment on the actual poetic merits of the anthology is a telling point: mere association with, or inference of a revolutionary impulse is sufficient to render the volume a threat. In fact just as the South African censors saw themselves as preservers of literary quality, so MacDiarmid, in his foreword to the first edition (and somewhat uneasily it appears) addresses the issue of the literary merit of the collection and concludes that, although graffiti-like with a ballad feel, “this collection heart-warmingly demonstrates the great ground of hope”<sup>65</sup> he foreshadows in the writing. Debate about literary merit is not new as McDonald has shown in his book *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice, 1880-1914*. In 1813 Shelley too was preoccupied with the literary merit of his poems. Of his unpublished poems Shelley wrote: “One fault they are indisputably exempt from, that of being a volume of *fashionable literature* [sic].”<sup>66</sup> As we have seen, the impact of Feinberg’s collection could be measured in part by the publication of the second enlarged edition<sup>67</sup> in 1980 which included the work of eleven more poets. Exiled poets could not hope for popularity although in fact the canonical status of Mphahlele and Kunene, to name only two, was already being created by their prolific and important contributions to literature in South Africa.

From the first edition, Malan objected to two Nortje poems, “Autopsy”(57-58) and “Questions and Answers” (61-64), particularly singling out as offensive Nortje’s use of the word “jackboots” in “Autopsy”: “the arid atmosphere where jackboots scrape” (57). Juxtaposed against the bland pronouncements of a censor writing the required script, we find a poem that reads as a lyrical tribute to Dennis Brutus and other exiles, “the luminous tongue in the black world” (58) who Nortje finds “grave and patient,” the exiles of history cast adrift from their

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, “Foreword,” in *Poets to the People*, ed. Barry Feinberg (London: George Allen Unwin Ltd., 1974), 14.

<sup>66</sup> Cameron, *The Young Shelley: Genesis of a Radical*, 259.

<sup>67</sup> Feinberg, ed., *Poets to the People: South African Freedom Poems*. Enlarged ed. Further citations of this work are given in the text.

homes where “luminous possibilities” are “no longer” (58). We enter a strange historical moment in the post-apartheid world where the political force of poetic language is hushed by time and the lyrical qualities of the poem become the act of resistance itself. In “Questions and Answers” written in 1970 shortly before his death, Nortje alludes to classical references and European poets in his very personal engagement with South Africa’s past and the nature of exile: “exile was implanted / in the first pangs of paradise” (63) as a Coloured South African who did not know his father, “white trash / coursing through my blood” (64). Nortje always struggled to find his poetic voice and in this poem those sentiments censors might have read as a political call for action are in fact the opposite: “I will not slip across the border / . . . I am no guerrilla” (62) . . . “Who but to save me but myself?” (64). Nortje’s mentor, Dennis Brutus, was also far away in exile.

Back in South Africa the Black Consciousness poet, publisher and music promoter Spho Sepamla believed that writing poetry was a way to subvert the words used to obfuscate, to punish, to imprison, the “words / that stalk our lives like policeman”<sup>68</sup>:

we mean words  
that spell out our lives  
words, words, words,  
for there’s a poetic licence  
doing the rounds in these parts.<sup>69</sup>

Sepamla, who founded the Federated Union of Black Arts,<sup>70</sup> was to win the South African English Academy Thomas Pringle award for poetry for his banned book of poems *The Soweto I love*, the subjects of Sepamla’s poems living a world away from the strictures of the South African censors.

We see a new language affecting poets imprisoned during this period and appearing in print and performance during times of increasing ferment in the urban areas of South Africa. Mongane Wally Serote uses a very different idiom and tone with a verve and directness not found in Nortje’s experimentation with literary influences. From the *Poets to the People* first edition, the censor objects to his use of the word “shit,” “what’s in this black ‘shit’?” (69), a poem also infused with personal observations but with more confidence in a growing sense of change: “No! This is no dying when the trees / leave their twigs” (70). This is the collective hope that Feinberg identifies as a literary representation of cultural change in South Africa imbibing the

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<sup>68</sup> Spho Sepamla, *The Soweto I Love* (London: Rex Collings Ltd, 1977), 40.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>70</sup> Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane, “The Life and Times of Spho Sydney Sepamla: A Tribute 22nd September 1932 – 9th January 2007,” accessed December 27, 2008, <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/custom?q=cache:DyrwyqkCS5MJ:www.mutloatse.com/documents/Spho%2520Sydney%2520Sepamla.doc+spho+sepamla&cd=9&hl=en&ct=clnk>.

influences of the Black Consciousness movement as well as reacting to the increasing suppression of writers and activists.

In the poetry of Mongane Wally Serote we find lyrics which are more jazz-like, filled with the influences of township lingo and jargon and speaking to us in a present of which we become a part: “I leave behind me, my love...My death / That’s so related to me as a wink to the eye.” We read death as an ever-present shadow in these poems, we travel the buses of City Johannesburg (68) “Jo’burg City,” looking over our shoulders with our “frozen expressions” (69) and as we “listen!” (73), we hear sounds we miss in Pieterse’s poems in the same collection. We hear the dying, the gash, the “black miseries to the core of silence” (73) and we too “wait” (74), with hope. Our concerns are moulded by Serote’s passion for his people and his city as this passion becomes a political statement of intent: “There was a growth of thought here, / Then words, then action” (71).

Serote was detained in solitary confinement in 1969 for his work with the ANC and the Black Consciousness movement and spent nine months in prison in solitary confinement. Attempting to define a black identity, he asks sardonically:

what’s the matter  
to belong, to be owned, to be locked  
in a million eyes. (91)

He imagines a time when he can say “ah / Africa / is this not your child come home,” (48) when to belong no longer means a state of slavery, of being owned. An extract from his famous poem “No Baby Must Weep” forms a central question of this thesis: what does it mean to belong to a country? In 2007 the South African President Thabo Mbeki awarded Serote the Order of Ikhamanga in Silver for “excellent contribution to literature, with emphasis on poetry and for putting his artistic talents at the service of democracy in South Africa.”<sup>71</sup>

Keorapetse Kgositsile reviewed Serote’s book-length poem *A Tough Tale* in *Rixaka* (an ANC newsletter) in 1989<sup>72</sup> and found in it “spiritual” enrichment, the words of one comrade to another when both understand the social milieu that produced both the poem and the condition of solidarity as voices refusing exile.

Keorapetse Kgositsile was recognised by the new South African government for his services to both poetry and politics by being made Poet Laureate in 2006. He had left South Africa to work for the ANC in 1961 and quickly made a name for himself in New York as one of the Harlem Renaissance poets. His love of jazz informed much of his poetry and his literary

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<sup>71</sup> Republic of South Africa The Presidency, “The Order of Ikhamanga in Silver,” 1st November 2008, [http://www.thepresidency.gov.za/orders\\_list.asp?show=382](http://www.thepresidency.gov.za/orders_list.asp?show=382).

<sup>72</sup> Keorapetse Kgositsile, “Book Review: A Tough Tale by Mongane Serote,” *Rixaka* 1 (1989), 24.



criticism directed new interpretations to the meaning of Africa among his American compatriots as he criss-crossed cultural boundaries between Africa and America.

In a 1978 interview Kgositsile discusses how he began his education in the servant's quarters of a white house in a white suburb where he read whatever books came his way. He found out about segregated education when he realised his school was in a black district some way from his home. This is how he describes "Bantu education":

In South Africa there are different schools for different ethnic groups. With the standard African groups, there are what they call standardized languages: they have standardized Zulu, Xhosa, Tswana and Sotho. What they do is lump all the groups that seems to have any linguistic closeness. The white government gets Europeans to write the textbooks. Then they can include all the blatant propaganda they want to.<sup>73</sup>

As Kgositsile points out, Afrikaners were able to encase myths about their own past in the textbooks prescribed for both white and black schoolchildren. The Transvaal Teachers Association, proponents of the Afrikaans language policy, wrote the textbooks of the 1950s which were to remain dominant in South African schools for decades.

Kgositsile's path to writing came as a means of entertaining himself and friends during high school at Matibane High in Johannesburg where, under the influence of a school teacher, he decided to become a writer. He spent time using the library of the United States Information Services where he became familiar with the writings of Langston Hughes, James Baldwin and Frank Yerby. He eventually joined the ANC and worked for the newspaper *New Age*. He married Baleka Mbete, a teacher who had graduated from Lovedale. Mbete-Kgositsile wrote poetry, held high offices within the ANC and went on to become deputy-president of South Africa (2008-2009) having been politicized when her father was appointed as the librarian at Fort Hare in 1958. Here she met his fellow members of the soon to be banned South African Communist Party.

In his poem "For Gwigwi" Kgositsile uses a mix of cultural idioms as well as strong musical influences so that the singing voice of the jazz scene resonates:

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<sup>73</sup> Rowel, Charles H., "'With Bloodstains to Testify': An Interview with Keorapetse Kgositsile," *Callaloo* 2 (February, 1978), 23.

*Okay you insistent bugger I can hear you say  
Come come come come then I want to see  
The back of the moon anyway*<sup>74</sup>

for the loss of a friend whose death

we regret...  
Like boers or drought of any season  
As if it were not to be expected. . .<sup>75</sup>

Another Kgositsile poem is a “Song for Ilva MacKay and Mongane,”<sup>76</sup> two fellow poets in exile:

You are Mandela You are all  
The names we are in Robben Island. . .  
.....  
I am no calypsonian  
But this you have taught me:  
You could say you were from Capetown  
Or Johannesburg Accra or Bagamoyo  
Newyork Kingston or Havana  
When you have come from tomorrow  
We shall know each other by our bloodstains<sup>77</sup>

The identification with exiles across the world takes on the symbolic stature of Mandela. Indeed Mandela the man, the word, is now a symbol for acts of resistance and altruism in struggles throughout the world. (For more discussion on Mandela as a symbol see Elleke Boehmer’s book *Nelson Mandela*). Kgositsile became an intimate part of the Black Arts Movement in the United States in the 1960s in which Africa became a symbol of a decolonized mind.<sup>78</sup> This creation of an imaginary Africa was to haunt Kgositsile’s poetry in exile. In a retrospective collection,<sup>79</sup> Kgositsile dedicates his work to the women of South Africa with a reminder that women’s rights remain a source of contestation in Africa: “I wish I had enough art of eloquence and grace to sing the woman [sic] of Mali” (“Montage: Bouctou Lives,” 83). His response to exile was to immerse himself in the cultures, philosophies and histories of black consciousness, yet his poetry always represented the pain that exile can bring to individual consciousness. He dedicates his poem “Exile” (49) to Aimé Césaire relishing the way words can unify traditions of resistance: “Did you say independence? / There are words here, we know, as any / place . . .”

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<sup>74</sup> Keorapetse Kgositsile, “For Gwigwi,” in *South African Voices*, ed. Bernth Lindfors (Austin, Texas: The University of Texas, 1975), 19.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Lindfors, ed., *South African Voices*, 18.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Margo Natalie Crawford, “Productive Rites of ‘Passing’: Keorapetse Kgositsile and the Black Arts Movement,” *Renaissance Noire* 7, no. 3 (2007).

<sup>79</sup> Keorapetse Kgositsile, *If I Could Sing: Selected Poems* (Cape Town: Kwela/Snailpress, 2002). Further citations of this work are given in the text.

Lewis Nkosi (who died in 2010) visited Breytenbach in Paris in 1963. Nkosi had been banned under the Suppression of Communism Act and went into exile in New York. Nkosi's experience of exile differed from that of Breytenbach as he embraced the freedom of exile, exile being linked to self, rather than to place. Yet like Breytenbach he never doubted his allegiance to South Africa despite being influenced by writers such as Faulkner or Emerson. Nkosi wrote seven poems which have been discussed by Litzi Lombardozi,<sup>80</sup> who points to the expressions of hope that influence his poetry. The poems she reproduces have more in common with the tone and style of the poetry published in the newspapers and ANC magazines of the time than with Breytenbach's tussle with language and identity. Nkosi's poem "Images of a nation yet to be" invokes<sup>81</sup> *Poets to the People*; "Refugee woman"<sup>82</sup> considers the plight of refugees anywhere with thoughts of "the world's miserable children," and in "Jealousy"<sup>83</sup> Nkosi reminds a rival for the affections of a lover that "I too am an African." That he was a South African remains a given for Nkosi and the terrors wrought by apartheid are captured in his novels, of which *Mating Birds* is the most controversial. Nkosi appears less comfortable with poetry than with his metier of novels and plays, perhaps ignoring poetry to write his uniquely South African fiction. In his stilted poem "What makes Poetry not Prose,"<sup>84</sup> this major prose writer ironically gives poetry the same prison imagery as *Mating Birds*: "Poetry lives on iron rations." Poetry is used to being restricted and thrives on this deprivation as iron sharpens the pen. The feminine Poetry "knows her worth," awaiting her readers who are "men and women sharp enough / to see the glint in her roving eye."

The poems of *Poets to the People* exiles read as both spirited and depressing inventories of the apartheid years and the effect of repression on the poets. In exile in London after seven years in a South African prison for sabotage, Hugh Lewin remembers his own imprisonment within the rhythm of the day:

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<sup>80</sup> Litzi Lombardozi, "An Introduction to the Poetry of Lewis Nkosi," in *Still Beating the Drum: Critical Perspectives on Lewis Nkosi*, eds. Lindy Stiebel and Liz Gunner, *Cross Cultures. Readings in the Post/Colonial Literatures in English* (Amsterdam Rodopi, 2005).

<sup>81</sup> Lindy Stiebel and Liz Gunner, eds., *Still Beating the Drum: Critical Perspectives on Lewis Nkosi*, vol. 81, *Cross Cultures. Readings in the Post/Colonial Literatures in English*. (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005), 127.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 132-33.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 134-35.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 137-39.

breakfast/wash-up/scrub/clean  
garden/lunch  
lock-up  
wash-up/scrub/clean  
shower/4 o'clock supper  
lock-up  
(Another Day, 48)

Here the repetition embeds itself into the reader as the routine did to Lewin. In "Touch" (60) Lewin dreams that "when I get out / I'm going to ask someone / to touch me" and recoils from the "fists and paws" to which the censor too takes offence. The gentle plea for real touch, loving touch, remains a hidden line in the censor's report. Instead the censor notes that this poem was dedicated to Bram Fischer, in prison for life for underground activities. Remember, these poems are said to be prejudicial to peace and order and a glimpse of the language through the censor's eyes will see bullets, blood, deaths, graves, interrogations, scars, freedom fighters, whites, prison bars, "children of Sharpeville" (Kunene 43) thrusting out like a rollcall at the censor's line-up. Yet the writing continues to look past the present: Mtshali, grimacing "at the ethereal cloud" (54) sees the need for hope: "have hope, brother, / despair is for the defeated" . . . but handcuffed his "mind...caged," his "soul...shackled" (54), he needs to resort to cliché to keep alive.

Many of the poems appear directly political. The censor seems ignorant that A.N.C. Kumalo was the pseudonym for Ronnie Kasrils, an Umkhonto weSizwe (MK) member committed to the violent overthrow of the South African government (Kasrils was Minister for Intelligence in South Africa between April 2004 and September 2008). Instead the censor points out that two of Kasrils' poems show contempt for the police by implying that well-known activists Babla Saloojee and Ahmed Timol did not fall to their deaths after interrogation. Kumalo calls for "vengeance" (37) and asks the poet to "let the people know / that dreams can become / reality" (41), and indeed, Kumalo was working actively with the ANC to promote those dreams. Post-apartheid we glimpse a more personal philosophy in Kasrils and Feinberg's homage to Bertrand Russell. They explored the furore created by Russell's appointment as the first Chair of Philosophy at the City College, New York, where Russell's morality and religion were deeply offensive to some and where the press waged a campaign to discredit him. Prosecutors at the court case rescinding Russell's appointment went to lengths to accuse him of immoral practice and amongst their slurs was an accusation of "salacious poetry."<sup>85</sup> In an interview with Kasrils in 1993, Kasrils mused that:

Pablo Neruda said there were three things in life that mattered, politics, poetry and love - and you can add sport to that..... What we need to do is keep to our

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<sup>85</sup> Barry Feinberg and Ronald Kasrils, "A Chair of Indecency," in *Bertrand Russell: Critical Assessments*, ed. A.D. Irvine (Routledge, 1998), 166.

principles and our idealism. The way I do that nowadays – I don't mind if I'm referred to as a romantic – is by reading Byron and Shelley. I read their poetry all the time – that's what motivates me, not an apparatchik attachment to a grey flag and Stalinism.<sup>86</sup>

Kasrils, the Romantic revolutionary, is talking back to Neruda, Shelley and Byron and forward to us, the reader, urging us to believe in the relationship of politics to poetry as the home for political subjectivity and a collective body politic. His utopian vision is a mixed one embedded in nineteenth-century idealism and African politics. His poetry has all the images of death, the rage, the crash, violence, the grey slab of death but “hope not despair” (41) unites the “comrades.” (39) Kasrils rarely allows himself any personal regret, and his poetry is more loganistic and less expressive than the Romantic allusions we find in Nortje and Brutus.

With much more force of imagery and poignancy, the poems of Mazisi Kunene are awash with a sense of the South African landscape, his own personal history and the political struggle for freedom. The censor simply mentions two poems, one “Thought on June 26,” (44-45) when the ANC signed the Freedom Charter at the Congress of the People, and a poem entitled “The Political Prisoner” (46). Both are written in the *imbongi* tradition with spoken evocations and repetitive phrasing, with the phrase “was I wrong” chanted to draw attention to the absurdity of not desiring “forgiveness,” “progress,” “goodness” (44), and a general sense of personal foreboding that the “shadows of yesterdays” (46) taunt the prisoner until his release into sunshine.

The censor complains that Cosmo Pieterse's poem “Guerilla [sic]” (66) “klink ongewens” (sounds undesirable). How does “undesirable” sound? Is the sound that of a lonely cry from within? “I sometimes feel a cold love burning,” with rhyming intensity, a “yearning,” a “spurning,” writing towards a realisation that

we must march the length of all your  
life, transgressing your whole body with harsh  
boots upon our feet. (66)

Here the body is South Africa, the transgression is national and the action is harsh and unnatural to the poet guerrilla. Pieterse's musicality revels in rhyme and his poems embrace a lyrical tradition which wraps violence in a shuddering thrust to “LIFE” (67). Following Bunn and Nuttall's idea that the body is a contested site in the discourse of South African poetry under

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<sup>86</sup> John Carlin, “SA's Top Bogeyman Has Poetic Dreams: John Carlin in Johannesburg Talks to Ronnie Kasrils, the ANC Member Whom the Rejectionist Right Loves to Hate,” Independent News and Media Ltd, accessed March 8, 2008, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/sas-top-bogeyman-has-poetic-dreams-john-carlin-in-johannesburg-talks-to-ronnie-kasrils-the-anc-member-whom-the-rejectionist-right-loves-to-hate-1504428.html>.

apartheid,<sup>87</sup> here in Pieterse's poetry we have another poet who confronts the demise of comrades with an altruistic belief in the moral necessity of using lyrical devices as an act of resistance, more akin to Shelley and Byron than Kasrils' more sloganistic poems. Does undesirable sound lyrical? Many poets (such as Celan, Neruda, Benedetti, Shelley) would embrace the idea of an undesirable lyric.

Cosmo Pieterse's poem "Love Exile Land"<sup>88</sup> also uses the image of a dream, of a "sleepless bed" to symbolise a state of exile. He too envisages a better future where "we may flower and fly further," so that despite his message "To White South Africa"<sup>89</sup> that "you're blind," in the poem "Give and Take," he wants to look forward:

And still insist to give  
And finger-place  
My love  
Even against your straight  
And angry back  
(Is poetry  
Grown revolving-explosive).<sup>90</sup>

Here Pieterse insists on his own dignity in the voice of poetry.

The censor E.G. Malan finds Oswald Mtshali's poems harmless and their publication in Feinberg's collection an anomaly: does he know what company he keeps in this collection? ("*Weet hy in watter geselskap hy in hiedie boek verkeer?*")<sup>91</sup> It is a question with a covert meaning; does Mtshali allow himself to be harmed by association with the other exiled or banned poets? Mtshali's poems cover the same dissociation we find in the poems of other exiles although his anger in this collection is more muted, less overt, less passionate than Serote's, perhaps fulfilling Malan's view of what poetry should be: a simple "Boy on a swing" who "Slowly...moves / to and fro / to and fro" (52). Even the line "Mother! / Where did I come from?" is muted by its juxtaposition with "when will I wear long trousers?"(52). Mtshali frequently employs the iconic apartheid-South African image of a road gang, prisoners put to work. His "Men in chains" depicts the road gang as "men shorn / of all human honour." In "A RoadGang's [sic] Cry (52) the gang cries "Abelungu ngo'dam, Whites are damned," but not by Mtshali the commuter who mumbles "I'm a cog in Mr. Jobstein's wheel"(53). Credited with a

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<sup>87</sup> David Bunn, "Some Alien Native Land': Arthur Nortje, Literary History and the Body in Exile," *World Literature Today* (January, 1996); Sarah Nuttall, "Bodiographies: Writing the Body in Arthur Nortje," in *Arthur Nortje: Poet and South African*, ed. McLuckie C. and Tyner R (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2004).

<sup>88</sup> Lindfors, ed., *South African Voices*, 35.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Kruger, *Publications Act, 1974. Publication or Object Application for a Decision/Review* .

resurgence of published volumes of poetry in South Africa in the 1970s, Mtshali met with a mixed reception among black readers and critics of the period. He exiled himself from South Africa to study at Columbia University and after returning to the country his collection of poems, *Fireflames*, was banned by the State. This time he left South Africa once more to live in New York.

The final poet in the first edition of *Poets to the People* is Scarlet Whitman, a pseudonym for Barry Feinberg,<sup>92</sup> the editor of the collection and then a committed member of the South African Communist Party. The pseudonym plays on a “red whiteman,” on the Afrikaans for white man, namely “*witman*” as well as the names of the poet Walt Whitman and *Gone with the Wind* heroine Scarlet O’Hara, both of whom could be read as representing the historical conflicts between America’s north and south. Some of the Scarlet Whitman poems have a rich, narrative quality as if telling a tale “This is Johnny / our resting representative” (76–77) and the innovative and humorously sardonic images urge us to “throw caution to the wind”(77) as Feinberg did in all projects destined to provoke and challenge collective sentiments of whatever persuasion. Other poems are more conventional with prevalent images of “thunder’, “storm clouds” “elephants,” “guns” and the “sweet smell of dust defeated” (80), poems which seem detached from place and poet, exiled from locality and self and as such float like disembodied words across time, neither engaging nor reaching out to us with a sense of history: “only poets dream their metaphor / scanning shapes to jog our empathy” (79).

We read, receptive with empathy ourselves, only to find the poet’s altruistic intent receding into leaden lines. It is to Feinberg’s preface that we must return and to his collection as a narrative which presents us with an historical moment in South African poetry, grounding the exile in words chosen as symbolic representations specific to the South African anti-apartheid landscape. We have seen that Feinberg presents South Africa as “poetry country”<sup>93</sup> and that one manifestation of the orality of South African culture as a representation of the poetics of altruism is the privileging of poetry by cultural workers, historians and political activists. We place value on these volumes as a recorded testimony of this historical literary representation of the anti-apartheid movement. Poetry was practised.

The second edition of *Poets to the People* shows the confidence of Feinberg’s initial project which burgeoned into the formation of Mayibuye. Mayibuye became the cultural group of the ANC which performed the poems in these volumes to European audiences. Thus South

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<sup>92</sup> Barry Feinberg, with an introduction by Ronnie Kasrils, *Gardens of Struggle*, vol. 42, Mayibuye History and Literature Series (Bellville: Mayibuye Books, 1992), 6.

<sup>93</sup> Feinberg, ed., *Poets to the People: South African Freedom Poems*. Enlarged ed., xi.

African exilic poetry received a reception the exiled poets could themselves witness and returned poetry to performance. Feinberg continued his project post-apartheid as an editor for the Mayibuye Centre located at the University of the Western Cape, a major archival source for the apartheid years and publisher of important historical documents including the exiles' oral history project.<sup>94</sup> His own poems in the second edition of *Poets to the People* are varied, some are written in the style of the emerging British beat poets of the 1970s while others are more traditional. Short, pithy poems depict the discordances of apartheid society while longer poems, more epic in nature, give voice to the condition of exile: "a face loved fades while reappearing, / home, a mirage of vapoured living" (27).

David Evans writes a tribute to the "skolly boy digter," "bovver boy poet" (16) Arthur Nortje, in which he attempts to define the role of the poet-exile using idioms and images of the South African landscape. His laments the loss of landscape which needs the poet's craft: "we've need of the poet to find them" (26), the sounds and songs of the townships "all are stilled / until his hard rebirth" (16). Nortje was buried in England, "naturalized now in this foreign earth" (17), the exile forever exiled.

With a flourish, Evans writes that "...the poets of our time are born in a mess of blood" (17), a sentiment we can also apply to a nineteenth-century Europe producing Byron and Shelley; the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror were both over in France, the Napoleonic wars were causing mayhem, the Battle of Trafalgar ended with Nelson's death and in 1812 in his maiden speech to the House of Lords, Byron called for the abolition of the death penalty. From this "mess of blood" were born poets determined to give a social purpose to their writing, a social altruism at odds with the popular depictions of both Byron and Shelley. We have seen that Thomas Pringle carried this English idealism to South Africa where it already existed as a South African concept of ubuntu. I have argued that the literary field was early on dominated by encounters between oppression and change as a means of control and of resistance; a strategy which led to the proliferation of poetry and its performance as a specific social act of resistance not conforming to imported notions of what poetry should be.

The archive or record of resistance becomes a living testimony to a recent literary experience and lived lives. So Nortje will "lie forever at the tip of the root" (18) as "the words live on" (18). Evans' Prometheus (12) is not unbound, "he endures" (14). Evans spent five years in prison and the image of Prometheus<sup>95</sup> recurs in his poems (just as it did in Byron's *Don Juan*

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<sup>94</sup> Mayibuye Centre Archives University of the Western Cape, *Oral History of Exiles Project* (1992-1995).

<sup>95</sup> See Chapter 3, p. 67 section headed Derrida and Shelley for a discussion of the Prometheus image.



and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, and Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*) as an image of imprisonment and endurance. Evans rejects the role of poetry as representing literature: "I'm not here to meet the entered debts / Prometheus paid those high upon the crag" (15). This poet refuses "graceful poetry" (20), to be "a slave of art" (21). Instead, "If poets must have flags...we'll go ugly and free" (22). In his dialogue between a "Poet and Guerrilla" (21-24), the poet's task is to "remember" (22) to sing his/her words:

The poet knows his duty  
whatever is past, whatever ahead,  
he must sing on and on  
without obedience to the living  
or enslavement to the dead (23).

Evans was a journalist with the *Natal Daily News* before his imprisonment and exile, becoming a lecturer in Creative Arts at Liverpool University in England. He returned to post-apartheid South Africa to read his poetry to a young audience in Durban in 2008 and this experience reveals the words of an exile, thoroughly naturalized, returning to a changed world: "In rich and often complacent Britain, we could learn from"<sup>96</sup> the attempts to create a united South Africa. The same creative impetus of organised cultural activity in the Natal region continues the work begun in the apartheid years.

Of the other poets included in the second Feinberg edition, three are women. In exile, Lindiwe Mabuza worked for ten years as an Associate Professor of Literature and History at Ohio University and in 1989 published a compilation of poetry by black South African women in exile.<sup>97</sup> The collection included Baleka Kgositsile, Rebecca Matlou, Ponkie Khazamula, Mavis Nhalpho, Susan Lamu, Dulci September and her own poems. In this volume she described herself as:

A prolific writer-poet with a teaching background. Sis Lindiwe is the epitome of the assertive Black women. Level-headed, analytical, cheerful and a born-leader! That's how she came to compile this unique anthology.

Mabuza joined the ANC in 1975 and went on to become a member of South Africa's first multiracial parliament. In Mabuza's biography,<sup>98</sup> we find an evolution of engagement with education and literature which empowered her to contribute to the so-called cultural renaissance fostered by the ANC. Mabuza seized her future by seeking out education, leaving South Africa to

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<sup>96</sup> David Evans, "Return of a Native," accessed April 15, 2009, [http://www.writersguild.org.uk/public/008\\_Featurearticl/278\\_WGGBFeatures.html](http://www.writersguild.org.uk/public/008_Featurearticl/278_WGGBFeatures.html).

<sup>97</sup> Lindiwe Mabuza, ed., *One Never Knows: An Anthology of Black South African Women Writers in Exile* (Braamfontein, Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1989).

<sup>98</sup> Elaine Maria Upton and Lindiwe Mabuza, "Born to the Struggle, Learning to Write: An Interview with Lindiwe Mabuza, Poet and Chief Representative of the African National Congress (of South Africa) in the United States," *Feminist Studies* 21, no. 3 (Autumn, 1995).

study in Lesotho. Back in South Africa, she was rejected for employment in schools as she did not have a South African teaching qualification and so she left for America to further her education and career. Mabuza subsequently became heavily involved in ANC activities including being editor of *Voice of the Women*, an ANC women's journal, and a contributor to and editor of *Malibongwe*. In an interview with Elaine Upton, Lindiwe Mabuza said of poetry: "we really didn't have within the ANC a culture that said that women should write, can write. And so that was the challenge for us in the seventies."<sup>99</sup> Despite seeing her work rejected by some scholarly academics, Mabuza believed that a new type of writing was born: "It's African poetry. They are manipulating the instrument of a language that is the oppressor's language."<sup>100</sup> Poetry becomes a means of resistance through its performative quality:

And so the poetry is part of a culture, part of a whole arsenal of weaponry to be used against apartheid. You recite a poem. It's better than a three hour speech. It gets to the heart of the matter. It moves people. They can identify with it because it touches them. It has a certain immediacy of communication because it is compressed.<sup>101</sup>

This is very much the style of Mabuza's poetry. She invokes images such as the gold mines with which most of her audience would have been familiar to draw attention to suffering and humiliation. She also conveys aspects of the body through words such as sweat, tears, blood, brains, limbs, death. Her body images are not the personal, subjective ones of Nortje's poetry but rather communal and collectively understood statements of a collective body politic, a political position: the personal become political. "Write an epitaph of love / With LIFE."<sup>102</sup> Gender presents itself in many of the exile poems as symbolic images representing the conditions of imprisonment or freedom.

Her life's work dedicated to women, literature and politics was recognised in 1997 when she was awarded the Yari Yari Award for Contributions to Human Rights and Literature by New York University. According to a New York University Press Release: ..... "Yari Yari is taken from the Kuranko language of Sierra Leone, meaning 'the future'.<sup>103</sup> It is apt that this award went to a poet who wrote "Forward ever!" which employs many of the images we find in other poems in this collection: animals dying, brave dreams and "new horizons . . . into the future's

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 621.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 622.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Lindiwe Mabuza, "Epitaph of Love (for Solomon Mahlangu)," in *Poets to the People*, ed. Barry Feinberg, Enlarged ed. (London: Heinemann, 1980), 99.

<sup>103</sup> James Devitt, "Yari Yari Pamberi--International Conference on Black Women Writers from October 12-16 " 18th June 2009, [http://www.nyu.edu/publicaffairs/newsreleases/b\\_fas\\_yariyari\\_09232004.shtml](http://www.nyu.edu/publicaffairs/newsreleases/b_fas_yariyari_09232004.shtml).

pounding shores” (90). Following a diplomatic career, she became the South African High Commissioner to Britain in 2001.

The poet Ilva Mackay worked as a librarian for the newspaper the *Evening Post* in Port Elizabeth and went into exile in 1977 as a representative of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU). She later became a senior executive in the Gauteng Public Service. Her most quoted poem, which appears in the second edition of *Poets to the People*, is her tribute to Mandela with the memorable first line: “You are just number 466/64 to them” (102).

Sankie Dolly Mthembu-Mahanyele, writing under the pseudonym Rebecca Matlou, grew up in Sophiatown and went on to the University of the North (Turfloop) where she graduated as the Soweto riots erupted in June 1976. She went into exile working for the ANC and after 1994 became a minister in the Mandela/Mbeki governments. In 1990, as Sankie Nkondo, she delivered a paper on women writers which analysed the position of women in apartheid South Africa, women who “have to give birth for the graveyard.”<sup>104</sup> We see images of birth, death and Africa as mother in many poets of this period. Nkondo maintains that the position of the woman writer is no different to men in terms of working towards political change, but differs in regard to literary purpose: “The process of rebuilding through literature a truthful literary history entails reforming the woman’s image as portrayed in male-dominated literature.”<sup>105</sup>

A poem about nostalgia written in exile under the name Rebecca Matlou highlights the South African exile’s dilemma, that there can be a “yearning” for a place where “babies are squashed” (“Nostalgia,” 123). How can you yearn for that which is harmful? I discuss this “nostalgic”<sup>106</sup> form of memory in more detail in Chapter 7. As such nostalgia is “not a repellent,” (123) it does not change the narrative of an ever present past. In the poem “The Storm Within,” Matlou urges the all-embracing “mother” figure to “submerge your zeal of self,” to become less a woman, to “replace my absence with anger” (124). It could be argued that these poems question the traditional depiction of the mother as a passive nurturer but Matlou’s mother is no Lady Macbeth but a poetic mother, a resister who can “dance and mock,” “dance and show scorn.” She tries to subvert the traditional male *imbongi* in the poem “A Soldier at War,” written from the perspective of a male soldier. There is a common language across genders, in resistance “even the birds chirp our language comrades” (127). After her call to battle, Matlou shocks the reader out of the “bush school” where training is taking place. She evokes the mother not as icon but as an equal in the political struggle: “can you mothers feel this note in your navels / can you feel

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<sup>104</sup> Sankie Nkondo, “Women Writers: A Separate Entity,” *Rixaka* 1 (1990), 32.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>106</sup> See Chapter 7, p.217, footnote 57.

your tits itch to be sucked” (127) as the mother gives birth to the soldier. Matlou is urging women to recognise their role in the resistance movement.

Victor Matlou was the pseudonym for Zinjiva Nkondo (Rebecca Matlou’s husband and Director of Internal Propaganda for the ANC’s Department of Information and Publicity based in Lusaka; Nkondo died in 2003 ). His dramatic arrest while flying over South Africa in 1979 became the subject of a court case which led to exile after a harsh imprisonment. In 1969 the South African publisher J.L. van Schaik published a book of Zinjiva Nkonda’s poems in Tsonga, *Mbita ya vulombe* (Pot of Honey) which they republished in 1980 as *Mbita ya vulombe poems*. *The long road, the tunnel*, a book of protest poetry was published by COSAW in 1990. Nkondo’s poem “The Slave Man” published under Matlou in *Poets to the People* speculates on the seduction of poetry for the “slave man”: “shall I love him / bake songs of sweat “(129); if I call him “worker...the poet shall say / I have failed” (130); “shall I shout Marx / to his hypnotic sleep-ear” (131). How do we take poetry to the people so that it arouses, shakes, wakes the sweat of work? In a strangely prophetic verse, Matlou muses that:

this shall be after this cloudy earthquake  
hovering in the voice of the wind  
when the poetry of sweat and hammer  
shall have destroyed this syntax  
of existence  
and what is expected shall be unexpected (131)

The words of the struggle will change the “syntax of existence” which makes man or woman a slave under apartheid and the post-apartheid world will be the normal one, the “unexpected.” This verse highlights the obfuscation of language under apartheid as even existence takes on syntax, albeit a legislated grammar of control. Working for change is itself poetry: “all men are poets: all poets are men” (Evans 22). The line is revealing: perhaps Evans would now write “all people are poets: all poets are people.” The “poets to the people movement” suggests a universality of gender.

John Matshikiza, a poet-activist, was also an actor and the son of *Drum* journalist Todd Matshikiza who wrote the musical *King Kong*. In addition to being a founding member of Mayibuye, John Matshikiza’s varied career saw him become Director of the Department of Culture of the Gorée Institute in Senegal (a position subsequently also held by the South African poet Breyten Breytenbach) as well as a journalist contributing to openDemocracy.net. Reacting to Mandela’s release, Matshikiza said: “We’d been waiting all of our lives for this. That is all I can say. It was the whole of my life.”<sup>107</sup> He recognises Mandela as a future leader in his poem “And I watch it in Mandela” (138): “There is fire here, / Which no prison / Can kill in this man”

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<sup>107</sup> Shen Liknaitzky “Poets Hail Nelson Mandela’s Life” <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/5187272.stm>.

(138). Matshikiza's poetry included praise poems as well poems such as "Lights": "we want to be alive, but that doesn't rhyme / With politics: the crises we're blamed for breeding" (140). To be alive under apartheid was to be neutered, to be rendered speechless, to be negated, to not write or speak. The poem is an ironic response to the *Guardian's* commentary in 1977: "This time it really is as if the lights are going out in South Africa" (quoted by Matshikiza 140), where lights can be read symbolically as representing freedom and hope. In Matshikiza's poem the lights become the dead and the living. Bannings, torture, murder, shake "alive new lights more suddenly than you can write" (140). As a returned exile Matshikiza maintained his involvement in South Africa's political and cultural life as a journalist, poet, critic and commentator until his premature death in 2008 at the age of 54. He wrote movingly about his return to South Africa:

Exile cut us off from the pain of apartheid, but also from the joy of simply being part of something greater than yourself. It had also cut us off from relatives whose unconditional love we hardly knew about. Coming home carries grave responsibilities.<sup>108</sup>

Having fled or escaped imprisonment or torture, some exiles found themselves in countries where they had to learn languages other than English. As part of military training, many activists were also trained in Soviet or Cuban socialist or communist ideologies which provide material for poems. Images of solidarity with workers elsewhere might read like tracts which the apartheid government could then conveniently identify as Communist, a dreaded bogey across the world during the cold war but perhaps more so in South Africa, where any expression of solidarity with workers could result in the label Communist. On the other hand Jeremy Cronin, a member of the South African Communist Party, wrote intensely lyrical and personal poems during this period. Thus for some exiles poems became a therapeutic means of expunging both the physical and mental pain of such anguish while also providing a mechanism for conversing in a familiar language. Many of the poems written in exile in non-English speaking countries were translated into other languages and so the poems of exiles continue to live multiple lives as they become part of a global diaspora of exilic writing.

Victor Motapanyane, who worked for the ANC, studied in Moscow and Bucharest where he published several poems:

Remember me  
When the azure sky  
Sighs with grief  
And the ash-pale lips  
Tell of my existence (142).

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<sup>108</sup> Matshikiza, "Very Tall: (a Biography of Todd T. Matshikiza). Prologue: Notes of a Journey of Towards a Biographical Exploration," <http://wiserweb.wits.ac.za/PDF%20Files/wirs%20-%20matshikiza.PDF>, accessed June 18, 2009.

His poems use images of light and darkness, as we have seen so symbolic of South Africa during the apartheid years where layers of meaning attached so many iterations to the meaning of “colour,” where “the flickering light of hope / Lights eternally” (143). Indeed returning to South Africa he continued to work among the poor, becoming Chairman of the Papillon Foundation whose aim post-apartheid is to “empower the communities to meet their own needs.”<sup>109</sup>

Klaus Maphepha (pseudonym for Vusi Mavimbela, with a second pseudonym which was “Themba”) worked in Angola as well as what were then the Soviet Union and the GDR. His charged poem “Sharpeville” shouts

dumb-shouted we are  
though we shout  
the twisting of arms in supplication  
at the tormentor (104)

not dumbfounded, not quietened but made strong by shouting, as for example that “I know pigs like a foul swim” (106) where he compares his knowledge of torturers with the knowledge of a bitter passage through water.

Duncan Mathlo, also a pseudonym, fled South Africa after the Soweto uprising in 1976. As a member of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the violence espoused by this military wing of the ANC is apparent in his poems. His poems written in exile confront the conditions of imprisonment and the atrocities of the apartheid regime. He addresses problems of “self-identity and self-derision” (108) moving between a traditional, oratory style in praise of past heroes of uprisings against the British in South Africa and modernist reflections on daily life, “to remind us / our unnatural circumstances” (109), where negative images reinforce life under apartheid, to poems which reflect the burden of resistance. The poet becomes a purveyor of what is natural in the face of brutal degradation as he imagines his last parting with his wife before he too might become a torturer’s statistic: would it be made to appear that “he jumped through the window?”(111). Just in case, he makes a “Decision: / To embrace [sic] wife / With the last affectionate look” (111), he seeks the affection of normal human contact. Mathlo pours out animosity towards the perpetrators of the Soweto riots with graphic images of what he calls

deep-seated hate  
Look at my big black hands,  
Shaking and itching to hold  
and pull your gullet out,  
. . . you have tended  
and bred immeasurable hate in me (112-113).

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<sup>109</sup> Papillon Foundation, “Annual Report 2008,” 120th June 2009, [http://74.125.153.132/search?q=cache:U1kKh7AWMIQJ:www.papillonfoundation.com/pdf/2008\\_Annual\\_Report.pdf+%22victor+motapanyane%22&cd=4&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=au](http://74.125.153.132/search?q=cache:U1kKh7AWMIQJ:www.papillonfoundation.com/pdf/2008_Annual_Report.pdf+%22victor+motapanyane%22&cd=4&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=au).

Mathlo's words reveal the depth of his despair and the endurance of those resisting apartheid yet even in the depth of his hate, he looks forward to a hopeful future carried, in part, by his poems as well as by his memory: "there is no lament," "there is no submission;" instead there is "building a future"(115). This extract from Mathlo's poem "To have respite...After the fight"(116-117) acknowledges the burden carried by exiles as they lived the resistance they wrote:

"I wish someone kind can shout: 'Coward'  
 .....  
 that Ma, would rather be dead  
 than helplessly see my head  
 stopping police truncheons  
 (as often as it does now)  
 in that cold, pass-carrying,  
 always jobless, police-dodging,  
 night-raiding, area-out endorsing,  
 permit-requiring, speech unpermitting,  
 thought legislated  
 white  
 world  
 out  
 there! (116)

The white world, where the colour white represents the ruling oligarchy of repression and privilege, is a world from which the poet is exiled but he is not exiled from the warmth of childhood and his obligation to his past. The white world is one of negation where thought is legislated and barriers are erected, however the poet can write his resistance which comes to us now as a testimony of that period. The rhyming endings carry an intensity which mirror the frenzy of a life spent dodging police truncheons. If this is life is it not preferable to be a coward, to opt out of resistance? This is not an option for Mathlo. "I have / to fight, / To have respite" (117). Here the stress falls on "have" and "to fight," with an ending cadence which might bring respite from oppression; to fight, to write is to become the "guttural sounds of your fear" (119). An intensity of feeling bursts out of Mathlo's poem "I, a Freedom Fighter" as he takes everyday situations and changes the power relations between oppressors and oppressed:

"I am the broken black boot  
 .....  
 . . . your buttock cushion.  
  
 I am the searing pain on your neck  
 .....  
 I am the pick in your shed  
 Handle. . .  
 .....  
 I am the detestable rat  
 .....  
 Yes, I am the howling barn  
 ..... (119-120).

The poem ends with the shocking image of “fearless servants / . . . majestically bearing your naked corpses for burial / nay, to throw it in an endless pit”: an image of Nazi atrocities here lauded as fit punishment for those who inflict “the bleeding shrine / of existence” (118) on others. Indeed the poem evokes our fear of that pit as we sense this has been the fate of the “scythed souls” (118).

The divergences of the exile experience have been eloquently discussed by many writers. Lewis Nkosi<sup>110</sup> alludes to the conflict between “escape” and “escapade,” of the fetishism of the disjointed state of being in which the body finds itself. These experiences appear in a number of poems with exile as their main motif. It is hard to find hope in Mazisi Kunene’s “Dreams in Exile,” with its images of “gore” from the “glittering spear,” the “dark lanes” to “the knives,” where: “Terror grows and poisonous eyes stand out / They protrude from a skulled head like those of a crab.”<sup>111</sup> This separation of self from body appears in many South African works. After hearing the testimonies given to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the image of a country pervaded by death appears in Antjie’s Krog’s *Country of My Skull*. And in this country of the skull, there are people. Kunene’s dreams had “shadows that were human,” somewhere “Those who are in the dream are freed,” freed from “nightmares of sealed walls.”<sup>112</sup> These are the walls of solitary confinement, the walls of the nightmare, the walls of the exile’s prison where there are strange shadows that might be human, images of emaciated people walking like shadows of what it means to be human. Inside we do not find Plato’s cave. “Dreams in exile” is a powerful dirge-like poem, the violence of its images as much a critique of degradation as those of Celan’s *Todesfuge*. Yet Kunene also writes the lyrical “Awakening from the night”:

Now the night is no longer alone  
Songs are sung and praises are sacred words  
And you walk into the valley of a new summer  
The sleep is the parent, the pregnant season of growth,  
We return to her ceremony for a rich tomorrow.<sup>113</sup>

In this much more traditional, gentle poem which resembles in tone and format early twentieth-century South African poetry, the reference to *imbongi* and to the traditional songs of his childhood remind Kunene of a possible return in a possible future. Africa’s Poet Laureate in 1993 and South Africa’s first Poet Laureate in 2005, Mazisi Kunene originally wrote in Zulu and was lauded by UNESCO and other international organizations for his contributions to the anti-

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<sup>110</sup> Lewis Nkosi, “The Wandering Subject: Exile as Fetish,” in *Africa, Europe and (Post) Colonialism: Racism, Migration and Diaspora in African Literatures*, eds. Susan Arndt and Marek Spitzczok von Brisinski (Bayreuth: Breitinger, 2006).

<sup>111</sup> Lindfors, ed., *South African Voices*, 22.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 23.



apartheid movement as well as cultural forums and teaching in America and England during the apartheid years. I will discuss this important poet more fully in the next chapter.

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## Chapter 7: Write into the Night

All talk in this sad bitter motley-funeral-land is politics, whether it is whispering talk, talking shit, spitting into the wind or speaking in his master's voice. It's not a choice a writer has, it's neither using nor abusing poetic license . . . no, it lies at the very nature of communication.

Breyten Breytenbach, *A Season in Paradise*

Some of us cannot battle with this conflict any more. I cannot. But wherever I go I shall leave a chunk of myself here because I think of myself as a woman of Southern Africa – not as a black woman but as an ordinary and wryly humble woman. There was this immense conflict, pressure, uncertainty and insecurity that I have lived with for so long. I have solved nothing. I am like everyone else – perplexed, bewildered and desperate.

Bessie Head, *A Woman Alone*

In South African exilic poetry there appear, emerge, submerge, narratives of silence and articulation, of negation and progression. Without writing or expression or language there is no self, no home, and no attachment. Writing is seen as a necessary and essential cry for rights, the right to live, to be, to express. Here we find a concept of exile as that which has been forced to disappear reappearing always as a symbol of hope, as the altruistic act or praxis of writing itself. Self-interest here is a means of, or to, survival; the end-product, a poem, an expression of hope. Exile is as much a psychological state of mind as it is a physical reality whose immediacy is subverted by politics and personality and is recorded through pockets of history<sup>1</sup> in the poems of Dennis Brutus, Jeremy Cronin or Keorapetse Kgositsile, in Aimé Césaire or Langston Hughes or Mario Benedetti and in the theoretical writings of Franz Fanon or Antonio Gramsci. While having echoes of the romantic convergences of nature, self, time and place, exilic writing reveals a vulnerability and an uncertainty which becomes a trusted encounter between us, the audience, in whatever time or place, and the past or present written as an expression of survival and resistance in the face of repression, exilic writing as a poetics of altruism.

### **Es'kia Mphahlele: Coming home**

Es'kia Mphahlele died in 2008 after a life devoted to literature, writing, education and South Africa. Through his prolific output he contributed to all major intellectual debates on South African writing, black identity, censorship, cultural freedom and the role of literature in political change. His publications reflect his changing views about African humanism and

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<sup>1</sup> Berger, *The Shape of a Pocket*.

African agency as he promoted and publicized African literature in his teaching, speeches, short stories, literary criticism and his less well-known poems. His wide-spread influence can be seen by his inclusion in most books and articles on South African literature as well as by the extensive world-wide coverage announcing his death.

As an activist Mphahlele followed his own path. Protesting against the Eiselen report on the proposed new education system for black South Africans, Mphahlele was banned from teaching in 1952 and eventually went into exile in 1957, living in Nigeria, Kenya, Zambia, France and finally the United States. He ran the Chemchemi Creative Centre in Nairobi with a view to creating an African cultural institution to promote an African cultural identity. He contributed to literary debate on identity, nationalism and Négritude, expounding views later criticized by writers such as Ndebele and Nkosi for being too harsh on the Négritude poets. In 1983 he established a Department of African Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand after first being banned from taking up a teaching appointment offered to him on his return from exile in 1977. His whole life was driven by a desire to educate and to promote an African sensibility.

In his book *Relocating Agency: Modernity and African letters*, Olakunle George contends that literary theory in Africa is emblematic of “discursive practice”<sup>2</sup> and that the resulting “African letters” is an appropriate development alongside Anglophone literary criticism during the same period. Mphahlele certainly falls into that school of African critic who defined their views in terms of generic African representations and who saw themselves as agents of change against those Anglophonic or European traditions. For George, the fact of being able to analyse and write a book on African literary theory is evidence in itself of a tradition of letters starting with the 1948 publication of Senghor’s *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*.<sup>3</sup> As a literature of agency, African letters is also, I contend, the agency of altruism which finds some commonality with the poetry of resistance in other parts of the world. Thus while the nature of agency might define African literary practice, the use of poetry as an altruistic agent for that practice is not purely African but rather finds its force in the relationship of exile to poetry. What distinguishes the nature of South African literary criticism in relation to exile, poetry and agency is the extent of its development over a much longer period of time than that denoted by George. In this sense, South African exilic poetry covers the period of modernity within which altruistic representations of resistance to the colonial project begin

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<sup>2</sup> Olakunle George, *Relocating Agency: Modernity and African Letters*, SUNY Series: Explorations in Postcolonial Studies (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York, 2003), x.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

well before George's earliest landmark publication of 1948 (the year incidentally that the South African Nationalist Party gained power in South Africa and proceeded to entrench apartheid in law). The early black journals in South Africa had already started the trend towards African letters or literary criticism in the 1880s (see Switzer<sup>4</sup>).

Like Said, Mphahlele has written extensively on the condition of exile. In an article entitled "Africa in exile,"<sup>5</sup> Mphahlele describes the milieu of exiles within Africa as "the tragic unfolding of the imperial theme" (30). As someone who broke his affiliation with the ANC after chairing the CIA-fronted Congress for Cultural Freedom (Mphahlele and many others did not know for some time that the CIA had set up this forum), Mphahlele deconstructs his exile as a "private world...riddled with guilt" (30). He discusses Senghor, Kofi Awoonor and Christopher Okigbo's depiction of the exile as a prodigal who must rediscover the African sense of self and identity which was stripped away by European colonialism, as distinct from the South African experience where "Senghor's image of the prodigal was unheard of"(30). Instead Mphahlele sees the South African exile as being defined by dispossession. He maintains that South African nationalism developed firstly in terms of land ownership and the drive for survival under slave-like conditions and secondly in relation to Africa as a whole as a means of reclaiming a sense of belonging to a continent with traditions, values and cultures quite separate from those imposed by colonialism.

Mphahlele felt compelled to return to South Africa as his whole intellectual and emotional being was suffused with a constant feeling of not belonging, either in America or elsewhere in Africa:

I had come into a line of tradition in America that had started long ago, and could not grasp the American's cultural goals. I saw them as too fragmented for me to feel part of a unified purpose. I want to teach a community whose cultural goals and aspirations I can comprehend, because education is for me an agent of culture at the same time it is culture itself. .... Indeed, exile had become for me a ghetto of the mind (47-48).

Mphahlele's poetic depiction of the beginning of his exile finds shape in the long poem "Exile in Nigeria."<sup>6</sup> Here the Northern wind sweeps the poet aside with unfamiliar sounds and smells: "I feel a certain void / now my enemies are out of sight," (168) and makes mockery of his expectations of freedom as a metaphor for European expectations. The wind is a "pretentious thing!"..."lispig / dead prophecies / collected from the ruins of lost empires" (169). Mphahlele prefers the "vibrant painful south of the south" where "we [run] fighting running, / straining /

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<sup>4</sup> Les Switzer, ed., *South Africa's Alternative Press* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Es'kia Mphahlele, "Africa in Exile," *Daedalus* 111 no. 2: Black Africa: A Generation after Independence (1982). Further citations of this work are given in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Mphahlele "Exile in Nigeria." Further citations of this work are given in the text.

like a universe of bending reeds” (169), always moving forward with an urgency and expectation of a better future. The sounds of the poem take on a performative and talkative tone:

I had only surmised  
since I left the palpitating painful south of the south  
they’ve done it to me-  
taught me the violence,  
revenge of Europe,  
uncivilized me  
by the law of  
paper  
gun  
baton (170)

The image of Europe as the uncivilized agent is an example of George’s analysis of African literature and theory as needing to assert an alternative agency – the clash of two different humanisms sees the blurring of meaning of the dominant language. Who is the civilized if the dominant values are paper (legislation), gun and baton? Mphahlele was influenced by current literary modes in Nigeria at the time he wrote the poem (1959) and here he distinguishes between Northern influences and the culture of the south:

Enough!  
I shan’t be wooed:  
Shelley’s long long dead,  
no messages thrown to the winds anymore (172)

He initially rejects the call of Shelley’s “west wind,” Shelley’s ode to both the barren winter and the future heralded by spring as well as his appeal to the power of words, “be through my lips to unawakened earth / The triumph of a prophecy.”<sup>7</sup> Mphahlele’s nod to, and rejection of, Shelley captures the essence of George’s theoretical stance, that “acts of will, and acts of language, turn out to be simultaneously productive and limited. In this way, the creative writers turn out to have all along been theorists of agency.”<sup>8</sup> Together with many South African exilic poets, Mphahlele broods on the importance of poetry as an agent of change and then wrestles with the dilemma inherent in an inherited Romantic tradition. An altruistic belief that performative acts of writing can be a harbinger of change through the act of writing itself informs much South African exilic poetry. In the case of poets published in ANC journals as well as Mphahlele, Brutus, Nortje and Kunene, there is a constant struggle to break through the barriers of language as well as the inevitable psychological and physical constraints of the condition of exile: “the immigrant’s journey’s a long long one, / heavy” (172).

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<sup>7</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Ode to the West Wind,” in *Poems of Shelley*, ed. Edmund Blunden (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1954), 516.

<sup>8</sup> George, *Relocating Agency: Modernity and African Letters*, 104.

We feel the heaviness of the journey through the passage of the long poem as Mphahlele struggles to make sense of his exile “converging point of centuries of change, / a continent of test-tubes” (173), comparing the great experiment of colonialism with a gut-destroying wind: “Meantime, / let them leave my heart alone!” (174), the heart needs to be free to find its own way.

Mphahlele was an advocate for African poetry to dispense with the lyrical tradition when its role as agent became that of resistance. In the 1950s Mphahlele was part of what was retrospectively known as the *Drum* generation, a group of writers who co-edited, published and reported for *Drum* magazine. With *Drum* writers being at the forefront of a new wave of modernist writing concerned with the immediacy and urgency of everyday life, Mphahlele experimented with form and tradition. His poem “The God of Formal Ways”<sup>9</sup> calls on poetry to “baffle reason, lull the storm / Of passion, and the pain of truth” (156) and is at the cusp of the change to a more urgent poetry which would reflect reality and become less formal, more experimental.

Two modernist examples from Mphahlele appear in the Lindfors collection discussed earlier. Here is an extract from “A Poem for all the victims of racist tyranny in South Africa”:

The hounds are breeding where our house is fallen  
ourselves we roam  
the wilderness . . .  
.....  
. . . go tell them there across the seas go tell him  
  
tell them that his mother’s dead six years  
hounds are watching  
hounds are waiting-  
she told him not to write no more no more<sup>10</sup>

In this poem Mphahlele moves from despair to hope, switching from the personal to the impersonal in a defiant gesture of solidarity with those he calls victims, those who have died under apartheid; here too “exile is a ghetto of the mind” where “perhaps we can still sing *a better day’s / a coming soon*” (26), an ironic reference to the contradictions of being free in exile while wishing to return to the country where only suffering is an alternative: “teach us, Elders, / how to wait / and feel the centre, time the time like masters” (26).

His poem “Death III Variations on a theme by John Keats, or E.M. scores 55, Dec.17, 1974” is a modernist dance with influences of music and an ironic reference to sport. Yet the lyricism and grace of Keats’s “When I have fears that I may cease to be” (27) in Mphahlele

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<sup>9</sup> Ezekiel Mphahlele, “The God of Formal Ways,” in *The Return of the Amasi Bird*, eds. Tim Couzens and Essop Patel (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982). Further citations of this work are given in the text.

<sup>10</sup> Lindfors, ed., *South African Voices*, 26. Further citations of this work are given in the text.

become “When you fear the day when you’ll be old,” a musical journey of the imagination yet one which must tell the reality of horror before “you’ve gathered all your harvest”:

before you’ve told the story-  
*everything*  
about the muscle apes  
who ride their tanks of fire  
dealing death  
holding birth in ambush  
so you want to howl  
howl  
howl into the night (27)

This lyrical, musical poem also cries in anguish, howls for a “love and love and love,” a “hunger for a feast of welcome / after all / the years of long and dizzy farewells.” Many exiles have commented on the denouement of return, no banners or “long and dizzy” welcomes for writers or academics, just changed faces, different buildings, often indifference. The poem moves with images of “jive” to the “drip / drop / drip” of the “ego centre,” from the centred subjective self, to the outside communal possibility of change that will recognise this “native son” (allusions in this poem to both James Baldwin and Allen Ginsberg). A reference too on turning 55, to the well-known basket-ball player Elburt Miller who scored 55 in a University of Las Vegas basketball game in 1967 (same initials E.M.) Mphahlele turned 55 in 1974 and passed away on 27<sup>th</sup> October 2007 aged 88, “beyond the millennium and beyond” having been a part of the change for which he had lived, written and taught. The poem echoes Dylan Thomas’s “rage rage against the dying of the light”; Mphahlele did “not go gentle into that good night.”<sup>11</sup>

Mphahlele received a mixed reception when he returned to South Africa in 1977, homesick and determined to make a contribution during the apartheid years. Through his poetry, fiction and general literary criticism, he embodies the idea of “belonging” to South Africa. In Mphahlele’s writing we find a creative and defiant person whose sweep of literary and lived experience, from Keats to American jazz, to Shelley, Langston Hughes and James Baldwin, culminated in writing to reclaim a sense of home, an elusive emotional state left undefined by movements across borders and words; a state in which the altruism of performative writing offers some continuity and comfort.

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<sup>11</sup> Dylan Thomas, “Do Not Go Gentle,” in *Cambridge Book of English Verse, 1939-1975*, ed. Alan Bold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 67-8.

## The Melancholy Resistance of Arthur Nortje

I find a striking absence of anger in Arthur Nortje's poems when read alongside those of his South African contemporaries, both inside and outside South Africa. Rather the poems are suffused with ambivalence, melancholy and a sense of emptiness as he struggles with his relationship to both writing and South Africa. Here is a poet experimenting with modernist and romantic notions of writing as he jostles with how to live, to love and to write. In much of his poetry Nortje confronts literary influences and form while his desire to write and to be a poet is continually challenged, but not shaken, by the realities of life under apartheid and as an exile.

Many critics have examined the poetry of Nortje. David Bunn has analysed Nortje's journal writing and poetry in terms of the traditional lyric and Nortje's physical and spiritual dissociation from the South African landscape;<sup>12</sup> O'Brien<sup>13</sup> has explored Nortje's letters which, he demonstrates, are infused with an enjoyment of the Coloured lingo of South Africa, thus asserting a strong South African identity not always found in some of the poetry. Sarah Nuttall<sup>14</sup> examines Nortje's use of bodily images as a focus for the poetic production of meaning. Hedy Davis<sup>15</sup> interviewing Mervyn Rousseau, asks Rousseau about the different sides to Nortje's personality as presented to his friends and in his writing, while Adam Schwartzman<sup>16</sup> pleads with us to read the poetry and leave the man aside.

Nortje was found dead at twenty-eight from either an overdose or suicide and his four hundred poems represent ten years of work from 1960 to 1970. This coincides with a bleak period in South Africa when political dissent was crushed and writers were subjected to harassment and bannings. In order to find a genealogy of identity in Nortje, O'Brien and Bunn have used Nortje's journal and letters to explore how his self-perception and identity were lived and shaped by South African politics. Yet Nortje's life was also shaped by the traditional literary education he received in Anglo-American literature and this becomes a source of conflict in his poems that appears to confine or restrict his writing. O'Brien maintains that Nortje keeps the lively experimental voice of the letters as a "marginal voice."<sup>17</sup> However we could, as O'Brien hints, see the voice of the poems as the true marginal voice; it is a guarded, melancholy, self-

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<sup>12</sup> Bunn, "Some Alien Native Land": Arthur Nortje, *Literary History and the Body in Exile*.

<sup>13</sup> O'Brien, *Against Normalization: Writing Radical Democracy in South Africa*.

<sup>14</sup> Nuttall, "Bodiographies: Writing the Body in Arthur Nortje."

<sup>15</sup> Hedy Davis and Mervyn Rousseau, "Arthur Nortje, Sound Recordings: Interview with Mervyn Rousseau," UNISA, <http://www.unisa.ac.za/Default.asp?Cmd=ViewContent&ContentID=18331>.

<sup>16</sup> Schwartzman, ed., *Ten South African Poets*.

<sup>17</sup> O'Brien, *Against Normalization: Writing Radical Democracy in South Africa*, 238.



deprecating one that speaks to us from within the constraints of apartheid South Africa, as if the effects of the ideology have embedded themselves too deeply in Nortje's psyche to be overcome by his love of words and writing. Thus Nortje resists his true voice, keeps this voice as marginal, and almost adopts the stance of censor of himself. He becomes exiled from the joy and pleasure of the images so dear to him drawn from nature and literature and so exiles himself from life. Ultimately experimentation with drugs – with other states of being – led to his death.

This concern with the literary, whether oral or written, is so much a feature of South African history that MacDonald is astonished to find that even South African censors were highly literate and regarded themselves as guardians of literature. As we have seen, a concern for a poetic depiction of political life in South Africa has shaped the country's past and present, and Nortje makes that concern a public one. By doing so, he struggles with the existential role of the exile who is not active in a political movement for change yet is exiled because of a desire for such a change at both a personal and political level.

On the fringes of direct political involvement but influenced by his mentor, the poet and activist Dennis Brutus, his melancholy is not contrived:

because I have wanted so much, your you,  
I have waited hours and tomorrows, dogged  
And sometimes doggish but you often listened.  
Something speaks on when something listens. . .  
(“Soliloquy,” 5)

And “something speaks on” when someone, something, listens – our reading of and listening to the poem gives life to the poet as his poem speaks to the future. The playful enjoyment of the words “dogged” and “doggish” is undercut by the regret and sadness that a conversation will always await its patient listener, those who have “vanished / without so much of an echo” (5) and so wait upon an always-future present. The feeling of always waiting, of not arriving, of having to hide, of “desire...become subversive” (5) is also present in the poems Nortje wrote whilst in Oxford and Canada. Not exiled for political reasons, but having won a scholarship to Oxford, Nortje is exiled increasingly from himself as the persistence of his situation becomes clearer:

invisible has become I hope the stamp  
of birth, of blackness, criminality:  
I speak this from experience, speak from me.  
(“Natural Sinner,” 137)

Being invisible became a desirable state under apartheid to avoid attention; it was also the effect of apartheid, to legislate out or to make invisible the majority of the population, to banish and to remove. In this poem even as the wrenching pain stalks Nortje, he plays with the sonnet form trying to create alternate rhyming couplets while asserting – “I know this state of non-being, I speak”; and also urges us to understand that the poem speaks “from me.” In Nortje's

poems this sense of constraint wraps us in a modernist landscape: “. . . In you / lies so much speech of mine buried” (“Soliloquy,” 6) an image of the end of being heard, as voices were literally buried and “. . . a spindly scholar’s imprisoned” (“Preventive Detention,” 7). This could be Dennis Brutus or it could be Arthur Nortje himself, a spindly scholar who cannot find his voice, imprisoned by himself, constantly creating images of loneliness, weariness, absences looking for that “sanity of purpose” lacking in the “laager” (“Collage of The Times,” 59) where “that grey day gagged it - spring could not speak,” (“Spell Cold and Ironic,” 8); again the gagging, silencing, repressive regime spreads itself across the land.

Of actual self each day, each word  
 expose a bitter fragment,  
 .....  
 Whose past is black or white no glance can tell  
 (“Bitter Fragment,” 23)

This is a poignant phrase in the post-apartheid years, an idealistic nod to a future where colour is not a factor in the country’s history. “Death is the final truth” (23) for Nortje and so life becomes suffering and hardship. After 1961 and the Sharpeville riots, there is a sense of finality in this poem which shows us Nortje’s intelligence and poetic mastery as he goes on to “endure weatherings and exposures” (23). As he moves from Cape Town to London, Oxford, Toronto, and back again to London and Oxford, Nortje becomes aware of the rot within his idealistic utopian visions of an Arcady (“Poem (for?[sic]),” 127), and yet his literary sensibility is influenced by a wide range of poetry as well as a reflection of the fragmented life of an exile looking outwards beyond his own bodily and spiritual preoccupations: “I as a sycophant wander in, timeserver to the Muse” (“Sonnet Three,” 135) who walks “restlessly / through the sewers of these distant cities” (“Questions and Answers,” 141) while “starvation stalks the farms of the Transvaal” (“All Hungers Pass Away,” 146).

In Nortje’s earlier poems a romantic voice surfaces, reminiscent of Shelley or Keats: “Into the lull with movement treason / I stride braced like a rod, resistance sweet” (“Windscape,” 21) where the alliterative beat of the “rod, resistance sweet” is far removed from the poet Siphiso Sepamla’s bald statement written twelve years later “life has been shit”... “my batteries have charged rage to an unbridled pitch.”<sup>18</sup> Nortje’s bitterness is “spiked with wonder... Beauty, spiked with wonder, is the lure / for these my threnodies” (“Rationale,” 96) as Nortje the poet strides forth like Shelley’s Alastor (rather than Sepamla):

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<sup>18</sup> Sepamla, *The Soweto I Love*, 51.

There was a Poet whose untimely tomb  
No human hands with pious reverence reared....  
And Silence, too enamoured of that voice  
Locks its mute music in her rugged cell.<sup>19</sup>

Even at this stage, Nortje too had a fear that silencing a voice communing with beauty (in Shelley's poem, Alastor's voice) would lead to death, the death of the poet. In Nortje's final poem ("All Hungers Pass Away," 146) the death of the poet becomes "pathetic, this, the dark posture," a "dark" death-knell with sombre foreboding and historical symbolism.

Nortje's poem "The long silence" (24) is a direct fusion of both modernist and romantic allusions: "the long silence speaks / of deaths and removals," so that, left with the "husks of the exile" as people leave South Africa, Nortje is reminded that:

The soul has left  
its slim volume  
of acrid poems only.  
Faint smoke is a sharper reminder  
of fire and life than agile tongues.  
Stench leaks from the gloomy tomb of treasure (24).

As Nortje loses hope of finding a sense of self in exile, his writing shudders with the disappearance of faith in the actual process of writing; the poems produced are acrid and burnt and he is fearful the poems will not last to make a connection across time and place. Nortje frequently uses images referring to grain or wheat, so here the image of the "husks" of exiles is redolent of a disappearing core of substance and growth.

There is a romantic flourish on leaving South Africa:

O poet answer everything  
so that the dull green voucher  
can hold a shiny photograph  
and miracles of destinations  
("Song for a Passport," 30)

which soon gives way to frustration: "but that memory / disturbs the order of the song, and whose / tongue can stir in such a distant city? . . . / We are here, nameless, staring at ourselves" ("Cosmos in London," 39). The state of being a non-person in the eyes of the State has transmogrified into the nameless state of being in exile where the known is simply the self.

David Bunn's detailed analysis of Nortje's relationship to modernism and landscape positions Nortje as a poet who failed to find a synergy between the condition of exile and his historical past, so that the bruised body becomes the only persuasive inhabited landscape. Seeing exile not simply as a dominant trope in South African history but as a lived experience, Bunn deals sympathetically with Nortje's ambiguous status as a Coloured and his lack of involvement with representative political groups in exile. Bunn views the poem "Waiting" as Nortje's late

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<sup>19</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Alastor or the Spirit of Solitude," in *Complete Poetical Works* (1904).

discovery of a poetical past within South Africa, at times an alien past for someone so immersed in the classics of a literature representative of imaginative freedom.

In the previous chapter, I have shown how mention of the body as representative of life and death, apartheid and freedom, runs through the poetry of the apartheid years. If the body can be read as an “imaginative refuge,” the act of writing is the first “unifying experience”<sup>20</sup> so that the past can live both in the self and in the object produced by that self. However, as Bunn argues, it is up to us to understand how the projected collective nature of cultural change contributed to the demise of apartheid. Nuttall takes up Bunn’s theme of the body in Nortje’s poems, arguing that the pain depicted in images of bodily degradation are not psychological representations of suffering but rather representations of the “self ‘beyond the social’, unable to be colonized.”<sup>21</sup>

So too by persisting in juxtaposing images of bodily disintegration with an enduring and constant return to poetry and a love of literary representation, Nortje joins a collective force which redefines the notion of exilic writing as an altruistic positioning from within the self towards a collective good. Nortje himself was well aware of this, writing in the poem “Identity” (76):

What indefinable blemish lets remembrance  
now focus on a scar an intimate wrinkle?  
The dead poets of Europe, the non-poets of the Soviet.  
The poets of war of Vietnam: none can tell me.

Nortje’s remembrance of the vanished, the silenced, the dead, validates a reading of exilic poetry as representative of an altruistic, trusted encounter; these voices still reach out to us. And in spite of feelings of nihilism, Nortje continued to write. The constructed notion of home as a symbolic landscape is forever embodied in the act of creation, the poem itself, both as an object (a body, a structure, a home) and as a subject (the self). If the poetics of altruism embodies a notion of hope or trust in a self-liberation by writing into a future yet unknown, Nortje’s death, whether accidental or by suicide, can be seen to disrupt this optimism, as can the deaths of Nat Nakasa and Con Themba.

Bunn movingly acknowledges Nortje’s late realisation of his connection to other South African writers and an historical past. The struggle and tension in Nortje’s poetry, of style and tone, of how to write as he plays with the words and images of his surrounds and his self-critical inner voice, are a reflection of a psychological tension found in writers both inside and outside South Africa during the apartheid years when the act of writing itself was subject to

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<sup>20</sup> Bunn, “Some Alien Native Land’: Arthur Nortje, Literary History and the Body in Exile,” 43.

<sup>21</sup> Nuttall, “Bodiographies: Writing the Body in Arthur Nortje,” 24.

interrogation. Bunn contends that when “landscape conventions failed for exiles such as Arthur Nortje, the body became their only place of imaginative refuge.”<sup>22</sup> On Christmas Day in 1961 Nortje wrote his own Hopkinsesque prayer: “For Mervyn – the 1<sup>st</sup> chorus,”<sup>23</sup> welcoming “violence / for peace and prosperity’s sake” in a land where the images “Jackboot’s bite and bone-crunch / slash-flesh, fear-and frightful rod / wrecking us” which occur as nightmares in the poems of other exiles, are here sardonically coupled with “MY [sic] delicate day / of jiving with Jesus and bopping with God / who tongues and flames us every road,” startling images of a god-devil at work propping up the structure of apartheid.

Yet confronting the act of writing, the notion of writing, the role of writing, also proved an imaginative refuge: “there is never work without resistance” (“Asseverations,” 108). So it is possible to read Nortje’s poems, journals, letters and notebooks as works which resist themselves, which Nortje resists in turn and which carry this resistance in their final form as we read them now. This is the form of cultural resistance Said envisaged as forming the basis of humanisms’ democracies. As Nortje worked, wrote, he confronted the pressures of apartheid, struggled with his literary education and resisted his natural voice in his poetry. In so doing, his resistance finds its way to us as a deeply felt melancholy. “Suicide,” Nortje reflected, “is the only problem in philosophy because it touches the core of being.”<sup>24</sup>

“I’d like to be ruined now in mid-ocean with Marx & Sh, if that does not sound too grisly. Art & politics [sic],”<sup>25</sup> Nortje asserts in what is now known as Notepad A (somehow a grisly description too, applied by the UNISA (University of South Africa) Digital Archive; to me, reminiscent of a court exhibit). Nortje’s enthusiastic discovery of Marx through John Lewis coupled with his love of *Hamlet* are thrown together with a flourish, the bravado and enthusiasm of a student learning and imbibing all the exigencies and influences on his thought and writing. His use of the words “ruined,” “mid-ocean,” “grisly” are humorous attempts to imply a decadent overindulgence in pleasure, however we could also foreshadow in these a prelude to the desire to escape which later saw Nortje turn to barbiturates and amphetamines.

Open access to versions of Arthur Nortje’s Notepad A is part of a valuable digitization project of Nortje’s work by UNISA. Nortje clearly loved Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poems; his intensity of description is evident in Nortje’s poetry. The literary influences mentioned in his Notepad range from the *Bible* and Plato to Thornton Wilder and Arthur Miller. There is

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<sup>22</sup> Bunn, “Some Alien Native Land’: Arthur Nortje, Literary History and the Body in Exile,” 43.

<sup>23</sup> Arthur Nortje, “Notepad A,” UNISA (University of South Africa), [http://bibinf.unisa.ac.za/infoweb/applications/a\\_nortje/a\\_nortje.xml](http://bibinf.unisa.ac.za/infoweb/applications/a_nortje/a_nortje.xml). 46.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

engagement with T. S. Eliot, Alvarez, e. e. cummings and Milton and the many radio programs which give zest to what he calls “the drudge” and “depression”<sup>26</sup> of everyday life. His love of jazz is infectious. He is intrigued by Sartre and moved with emotion by John Lewis and his exposition of Marxism. The tone of his Notepad is vivacious and eloquent as he obliquely reminds us of the problems of being overtly political:

Of course with Vorster slapping down the Banned List & "no quotations" law with the General Laws Amendment Act (which will go down in history as the Sabotage Bill) I could not quote directly & so decided to omit his name entirely with the specific request that he does not publish it, I sent Madness.<sup>27</sup>

In fact Nortje’s Notepad is consciously and conscientiously devoted to his thoughts about writing, jazz and literature as well as his musings on movies, eating, friends, dating and conversation. He writes about suicide pondering the act of taking an overdose as if in a scene from Camus or Sartre, so saturated is he with the idea of literature. Later, in Oxford, he writes two poems about Sylvia Plath, conscious that he too is a poet: “I stand in a kitchen of poetry-scorch-black, cracked and broken.” (“For Sylvia Plath I,” 46) and “I stand at the edge of the clearing, in moon and shadow” (“For Sylvia Plath II,” 48), sensing in himself the feeling of oblivion. The poems are filled with images of colour, silence, death, the melancholy spirit turned against him. From the Notepad, we see Nortje as a university student being influenced primarily by a literary and political culture. His earliest mentor was Dennis Brutus, and his love of words and language, albeit dominated by Anglo-American influences, can be traced back to his schooling with Brutus. Nortje’s feelings of isolation and exile slowly unfold in his poetry where he reveals the ambiguity of his birth and his classification as “Coloured”: “Poetry, however, should not be allowed to dominate the scene here, as it has up to now. Trouble is that so few other things have a permanent place with me.”<sup>28</sup> He already feels restless, an exile from himself. As a student at the University of the Western Cape, literature had become his home.

Bunn argues that Nortje would have witnessed the destruction of his environment as Coloured areas were gradually razed to the ground by the Verwoerd government. Certainly his Notepad mentions new dwellings on the university campus as ugly monstrous brutes but more memorable is his recall of the sky, of trees, of his very romantic notion of his landscape as “my mind wonders often, & [sic] above all I desire intensely to be [sic] a poet...Beauty moves me...”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 34. Madness was a poem sent to Dennis Brutus, published in the *Adelphi* and entered in the Mbari Poetry Competition in Nigeria.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 5.

There are echoes of Keats's poem "Sleep and Poetry":

Oh, for ten years, that I may overwhelm  
Myself in poesy:  
.....  
. . . Beauty was awake!  
Why were ye not awake? But ye were dead  
To things ye knew not of. . .<sup>30</sup>

I agree with Bunn that we find within Nortje's poetry "landscape (as) the site of a radical contradiction"<sup>31</sup> and that this contradiction appears as a constant juxtaposition, not only in many South African exilic lyric poems but also in the work of post-war poets, and is a recurrent feature of modernism. In Nortje's poetry, we can see how his depiction of South African landscape is often described in the same terms as the landscape of another world derived from literature. The idealized nature of landscape in the Romantics and Gerard Manley Hopkins influenced Nortje as much as the modernists:

Seeing a poem by Norman McCaig's in *The Observer* I used the same style with something [sic] I did. It came off beautifully, lacking only polish. I am letting the dust settle now, but again I am hammering out a new thing for Dennis, Bennie Kies & all the other 'exiles.'<sup>32</sup>

And hammer out he did, creating a remarkably broad spectrum of lyric poems which depict his experimentation with how to write. Yet his poems mark an almost diaristic growth in literary confidence: as his self disintegrates his writing becomes an eloquent triumph in the face of physical decay. His Notepad is a vehicle for poetic description; he diligently writes diary entries to experiment with language and to record emotion.

Nortje's poems talk across a social divide to the Soweto poet Siphso Sepamla who was physically grounded in what is now called Gauteng, spending his life in Pretoria and Soweto. Sepamla is part of a performative tradition and he uses the lingo and dialogue of his immediate world with a resonating force. Williams compares the Soweto poets' popular appeal to Shelley's recognition of the imperatives for a political discourse of liberation embedded in a poetic dialogue.<sup>33</sup> Sepamla's book of poetry *The Soweto I Love*<sup>34</sup> was banned in 1977. Here is a poet who was forced into a metaphorical exile where the dead surround him, yet the living "will be keeping vigil over the tombstones."<sup>35</sup> Sepamla's writing is sparse and does not have the literary experimentation we find in Nortje; the poems are descriptive and rhetorical, intended to record

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<sup>30</sup> John Keats, "Sleep and Poetry," in *Keats: The Complete Poems*, ed. Miriam Allott (London: Longman 1970), 73-77.

<sup>31</sup> Bunn, "Some Alien Native Land': Arthur Nortje, Literary History and the Body in Exile," 35.

<sup>32</sup> Nortje, "Notepad A," 13.

<sup>33</sup> Williams, "Shelley and the Soweto Poets: Projects of Resistance, Visions of Freedom," 85.

<sup>34</sup> Sepamla, *The Soweto I Love*. Further citations of this work are given in the text.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, Dedication.

June 16<sup>th</sup> 1976, the student uprising in Soweto. Sepamla engages directly with the violence, police, bullets, killing, clenched fists. The violence disembodies the poet: “how can I say home. . .how can I call this home. . .how come this home / has become a dungeon . . . I seek a care-less home / home to my heart’s content / home (“Home”15-16). Despite the comfort of language and comradeship the ability to inscribe home is still missing.

Apartheid shifts the bounds and boundaries of what we mean by home so that home resides within, and within a collective sense of hope. Nortje was unable to find a home within himself while Sepamla has a confidence that “I am the land” (“This Land,” 17). “I’ve never asked for a portion / there’s never been a need to” . . .thus firmly placing himself within South Africa, an assertive belonging. Yet writing to “The exile” (36) Sepamla feels the death of “our past spring” which “walked death a long way,” so that the exile appears to be the one left behind to bear the stench of death. The exile replies: “Words I planted in this cool adversity / germinate in April ardour,”<sup>36</sup> the seasons are out of place as words grow. These ambiguities of identification inform communities struggling with modernity. The Soweto poets were no exception to this.

In South Africa in the apartheid years, modernity appears in poetry as the reassurance of a future and sets up a dialogue between the exiles abroad and those exiled by legislation within South Africa. The intent to reform also falls to the audience or the reader as Shelley, Sepamla and Nortje desired. Nortje’s poetry represents this altruistic hope:

I ghost-wrote tales in Africa, pseudonymous and,  
hunched in shack or hovel in pursuit  
of truths in rhythms, nocturnes, melodies:  
grappled with the hardship of rhyme. (108)

### **Jeremy Cronin: Poet politician**

Jeremy Cronin, Deputy Secretary-General of the South African Communist Party and Deputy Minister for Transport in the Zuma Government (2009) is a well-known South African poet who spent seven years in the notorious Pretoria Central prison (1976-1983) and was in exile, not in his younger student year in Paris, but later in London and Zambia. Cronin established a reputation as a performance poet during the upheaval of the eighties after discovering poetry “as a survival activity in prison without much sense of an audience.”<sup>37</sup> His generosity in talking about his poetry and his experience in prison and exile gives us insight into his fusion of literary creation and literary criticism. In this section, by aligning Cronin’s poetry

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<sup>36</sup> Nortje, “Asseverations,” 108.

<sup>37</sup> Sheehan and Cronin, “Interview.”



with his personal insights and critical comment, I hope to show that his work embodies a trusting encounter with an audience; Cronin's altruistic performative poetry is South African in context and historicity and Cronin has the political intent of engagement with a wide range of issues.

If we arrive at Cronin's long interview with Helen Sheehan after immersion in the writings of Nortje, Mphahlele, Kunene or Brutus, we enter a different world; as a white South African, Cronin's childhood and formal education were fairly routinely circumscribed and so it was naivety, excitement and intellectual academic engagement that led to a political and then African future for himself, a choice Cronin eventually made consciously despite having been influenced by the European currents of philosophical thought prevalent in white English-speaking universities in South Africa in the 1960s. Joining a student cell of the Communist Party in the early 1970s, Cronin was philosophically influenced by Althusser and it was only overseas and when he was imprisoned in 1976 that he began to realise what it meant to be a South African.

In an email interview I asked Cronin whether he consciously tried to move away from a western metaphysical and canonical trajectory in prison and discover an Africanness in his writing that was tied to his activism. I also asked whether he experienced the exilic sense of abandonment of the past, i.e. as if the past disappeared, and whether writing poetry became the means of remaining connected to a present that was, in a way, happening without his involvement and a past which Cronin had to recreate in his mind, poetry thus stepping in to fill the loss or void.<sup>38</sup>

He replied:

Yes, I think quite self-consciously. It was tied to activism, but also to trying to construct a sense of self-identity, a positioning that did not deny my whiteness, but tried to locate it within a wider geography and a wider, solidaristic political project. The subjective identity questions emerged most starkly for me in my two post-graduate years in Paris (I was studying, not in exile). I had gone to Paris in pursuit of a eurocentric [sic] left culture (Althusser, Foucault, etc), and found it, and was deeply stimulated. This post-1968 wave of intellectual ferment in Europe was, itself, questioning western metaphysical and canonical assumptions - but in a eurocentric way. So I enjoyed the intellectual ferment, but also came to appreciate that I was/wanted to be South African.

In prison one of my key source books was the Oxford Dictionary of South African English - very much part of my poetic South Africanness project was about rendering language relatively opaque through lexical localisms - something that Brutus (like James Matthews), for instance, generally eschews. In the case of Brutus of [sic] Matthews I suspect this is about refusing the colonial interpellation of "coloured" people as clowning and folksy.

I'm assuming you're referring principally to my prison period and the poems emerging from that experience...I guess that these issues came up for me, but in a

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<sup>38</sup> De Saxe, Marian and Jeremey Cronin. Email interview. Personal correspondence. 2004.

somewhat different way. I'd had the privileges of a wonderful education...and yet I knew that most of the past had been erased in what I was taught or had bothered to read. Likewise, as a now increasingly politicised activist, I had a sense, long before getting to prison (never mind exile) that as a young middle-class English-speaking white, I had positioned myself to drift "above" a present that was happening without my involvement. So in prison I felt, ironically but factually, more connected up than I had been. But, of course, sustaining the connectedness (in prison) required an intellectual/poetic struggle.<sup>39</sup>

I was interested in comradeship as always plural and asked Cronin if he was compelled back to an "I" or self, disengaged from others, as well as place, during his imprisonment and exile. How did his approach to writing differ in these periods? The language of oppression was always around and apartheid relied on so much obfuscation enshrined in hundreds and thousands of pieces of legislation or random tracts and acts. I wondered if Cronin contemplated his poetry as resistance poetry and asked him to comment on how important the political intent of his writing was. I also asked whether writing was, as he had said, primarily a means of keeping a sense of his own self real and alive.<sup>40</sup>

Cronin wrote:

I think central to my poetic project - in prison, but still now - is the attempt to give voice to a political-lyrical subjectivity. It is a project which I think is to be found, in its own way, in much of the finest feminist writing of the last decades (eg. Adrienne Rich, let's say) - the personal is political, the political is also personal. But this assertion requires work, effort, struggle and part of the struggle is/can be an aesthetic, poetical effort. This is what interests me in Kgositsile writing...<sup>41</sup>

In his interview with Sheehan, Cronin expanded on his realisation that his thought had been determined primarily by European traditions and that this appeared to sit uneasily with his South Africanness. It was in prison that he began "to meet South African reality in literature"<sup>42</sup> as he started to read South African literature extensively. Even his involvement in a minority fringe group, the South African Communist Party, had kept his experience of a lived political struggle a white one as he had not encountered the non-racial world of the ANC. In prison, Cronin's political education was solidified even as his knowledge of outside events diminished.

Reading Cronin's poems today, there is urgency and vitality as he engages in prison camaraderie. What do we do with this urgency now? I came to Cronin's poems after extensive immersion in literary theory and exilic South African poetry hoping to find synergies between the disparate traditions. I discovered, alongside Brutus, Mphahlele, Kunene, Nkosi and Ndebele, Cronin who shaped one history of what George calls "African letters."

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Sheehan and Cronin, "Interview".

Cronin went into exile in the late 1980s and for the first time encountered the exile movement *per se* including people who had spend up to twenty years in exile. For Cronin “the underground and prison were somewhat easier to handle than the prolonged period of exile,”<sup>43</sup> where he met people who he felt “were demoralised, understandably, whose sense of self-worth was diminished.”<sup>44</sup> I have presented an alternative exile where, on the other hand, the self-worth of exilic writers was immeasurably elevated by the act of writing even if the reality of a foreign environment was often difficult. Cronin’s book of poems *Inside*,<sup>45</sup> written mostly while he was in prison, was first published in South Africa in 1983, and republished with new poems in 1987. The second edition shows the evolution of Cronin’s literary and political development during this period as well as his growing awareness of his South African engagement. His insight into the condition of exile, of being on the outside of the ruling political status quo, a “foreigner,” is brought home to him when in hiding within South Africa: “to write now is to be on the edge of that” (9) (where “that” is a “soundproofed interrogation” room) and writing becomes dangerous. His prison poems “were composed surreptitiously and paced out in my tiny cell, one two three, and back. They were written down on tiny scraps of paper and concealed. Alas I kept losing poems in cell searches and body frisks” (10). *Inside* becomes a metaphor for the place Cronin stored his poems, his memory, so that they could be written down as a personal record as well as a tribute to the camaraderie of prison life and the hope and longing to be “out / over the high walls” (“Poem-Shrike,” 13). The first section of the collection *Inside* contains poems depicting prison life, while the second section, “The Naval Base,” presents memories of childhood. These poems show Cronin’s development of a lyrical style, while in “Venture to the Interior” (49), Cronin explores South African languages: “To speak South African is to disturb history, the tongue bumping against repressed parts” (“Geography of the Mouth,” 51). His metaphors for speech and writing tease out his own self-discovery. He movingly recalls his recitation of the weather broadcast:

how reassuring it was to be able to gather a sense of space with the bare resources of tongue, bone, gum, breath, word. Each one was a shrine. Cooped up, I was able to make geography in the small theatre of my mouth (51).

Here we find the agency present in much exilic poetry where words themselves carry the power to venture into the interior of history and of self as an internal rebellion against incarceration or exile.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Jeremy Cronin, *Inside* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987). Further citations of this work are given in the text.

In relation to Kgositsile's poetry Cronin writes that, "Poetry is its own struggle. It is de-linked and linked, rhythmically, as it were, to the other, the broader struggle. There is dissonance here, yes, but not dissidence."<sup>46</sup> I would argue that in both Kgositsile and Cronin's poetry, and other exilic poetry, the fact of trying to bridge the gap *is* one of dissidence. Exilic poets, including Cronin himself, did not simply turn "oppression and struggle into something like a background bass beat, where meaning thins out into repetitive sound,"<sup>47</sup> but chose the altruistic, perhaps ritualistic path of poetics as a reminder to an unwritten future. Yes, there is a narrative, with its own imperative.

Cronin's discovery of South Africanness in prison occurred at the same time as my introduction to South African poetry; as a white South African (not in prison), I became aware of the altruism of performative poetry during the same period, the seventies. I felt the influence of the new protest poetry without understanding the history of the literary project in South Africa. A copy of Tim Couzen's *Return of the Amasi Bird* was the beginning of my education. Like Cronin I was not part of this epic. Now as we read Cronin's poems, I identify his urgency as a reminder to poets to continue to write with an awareness of the potential agency of our words, our dialogue with history. Through his poetry, Cronin becomes part of the South African story. His powerful prison poems place him firmly within the trajectory of "South African letters."

In his poem "Walking on Air," (21) Cronin tells the story of a comrade in prison, John Matthews, serving a fifteen year prison sentence:

White and 52  
So they treated him nice.  
They only made him stand

On two bricks  
For three days  
And three nights . . .

and reminds us that even as prisoners there was a racial distinction. As whites "we were among the most privileged of inmates" ("Beverly Hills," 34). Cronin never forgets this privilege and casts aside self-pity. He continues to struggle with the meaning of black/white in the new South Africa while recognising that for some children such a distinction is meaningless.

We see that Cronin starts to use a mix of South African languages in his poems, Afrikaans words like *blaadjies* (leaves) ("Poem-shrike," 13), *bliksem* (scoundrel) ("Walking on Air," 17), *trane* (tears) ("Pollsmoor Sketches," 24) together with everyday speech : "Jail's a shit sandwich / And every day we get a bit"( 24). This talkative tone is common to South African

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<sup>46</sup> ———, "Home Is Where the Music Is – the Poetry of Keorapetse 'Willie' Kgositsile," (Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 2005), 11.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

poets of this period. He paints pictures of racial tension by using the colloquialisms common in prison so that silent moments of contempt or disgust are given form by his words: “There is, / Between Johannes Stephanus Februarie / And submission, / This epic gap” (25). This epic gap speaks to the future, “Motho Ke Motho Ka Batho Babang (A Person is a Person Because of Other People)” (26). Cronin discovers the value of sign language too, used to fill the silences. Within this comradeship signs, words, discussion, song became the means to survival and hope. Words enable Cronin to explore South African history; they become “shells of meaning / left in our mouths / by thousands of years of / human occupation” (“Cave-site,” 53). The voices of Soweto have reached deep within the walls of Pretoria Central.

When Cronin was imprisoned for seven years (for distributing seventeen leaflets) he spent half the time in the Maximum Security section of Pretoria Central which incorporated Death Row. He writes movingly of the endless singing that took place for the forty-eight hours between notification of a hanging, “They received so-called Greetings Messages” (“Beverly Hills,” 33), and the actual execution, describing how the mournful singing changed to political declamations when three ANC prisoners organised a militancy among the death row inmates: “Now nine months already, brother / You’ve been sitting / On death row” (“Death Row,” 37). In his poem “Death Row,” Cronin tries urgently to recreate the sound of the songs. He uses short, “hanging” indented lines:

Glow like a  
 .....  
     Growl like a  
     .....  
 Glow like a  
 .....  
     Boil like a (39)

and

In and  
 Voices  
 Each other  
 Around of, sliding  
 Into each night’s  
 Finale. . . (40)

to build an intensity of incantation and chanting with the repetition of “like” to bring similes of life inside the prison walls even as the sound breaks down and he strains to catch the voices, ... “Perhaps I didn’t hear” (38). He uses this technique again in the poem “Litany” (54) where sounds predominate: “tchareep grrtch-grrrtch” or “kree-kree-kree-kree/sssszzzz”; where the pleasure and essentialism of speech and words gives hope:

Love Scout  
Periscope of Pleasure  
Winged Breath  
you come  
bearing the leaves of speech  
Tongue!  
O Ark of Language (54)

“Winged breath” comes to us from Shelley, from Mphahlele, as an ode to the power of shaping words and of creating dissonance. Cronin asserts the epic space, the gap he sees between dissonance and dissidence, in his own writing. He is wary of assuming that “this shadow play was real,” (“Plato’s Cave,” 55) that sounds with no audience, imprisoned words, can substitute for performative words. In his earlier prison poems Cronin constantly rebuts his own natural inclination to lyricism and so produces a hybrid and dissonant lyric. In the later prison “Love Poems” (73-88), he “found...in solitude solidarity.” (73). He writes that his “own sufferings and separation, as a minor victim of the apartheid regime, were not unconnected with a wider reality” (73). He learns to trust his lyrical instincts and like Brutus, to have the courage to embrace a lyrical style. Cronin is reticent to ascribe to his prison poetry a role in political change but he keeps a dialectic tension between the meaning of writing on a subjective level and its communal and collective, empathetic and altruistic embrace of political intent:

‘I love you’  
is also  
a small act  
of solidarity with all the others  
 (“Invoking my Muse” 75)

As political lyrics, Cronin’s love poetry is not as defiant as Brutus’ and given the reality of his wife’s death six months into his prison sentence, are more subdued. There is a subtle questioning of memory and creation as he struggles to recreate images of his past. We are drawn to the immediacy of the images as he drew these for himself in lyrical stanzas: the electric heater’s yellow coil,” “a drying pair of tights” (“Somewhere inside here . . . ,” 87) evocative reminders of his wife and a stark contrast to his prison life.

Images of water, drowning, being submerged and swimming, of rivers and pools in the later *Inside* poems evoke not only Cronin’s own struggle to “swim back” (“Mirror,” 88) but emerge as images relevant to current incarcerations – we have heard how Guantanamo Bay prisoners were subject to waterboarding, enforced drowning as a method of torture. From “Isiququmadevu” (91) (the swallowing monster)<sup>48</sup> to Guantanamo “take care, it’s said, lest your shadow / crosses the deepest of pools (91) each prisoner, in a struggle to relate the internal to the

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<sup>48</sup> Alice Werner, *Myths and Legends of the Bantu* (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1968), 211.

communal, is taken along a personal and torturous path, not always to freedom, to find meaning in the personal that is, ultimately, not personal.

The lyric form enabled both Cronin and Brutus to traverse this passage. In his mind and poems Cronin mulls over and plays with the days leading to his arrest:

yes, all this occurred  
with the sky's opening up  
between the even now of things past  
and the not yet where  
("One Particular Day, 1975," 100)

the words crossing back and forth between the then-present to the past and to the now present future. Minute observations in prison tease poems out of a bird, a spider, clothes, a thought; all become an opening up, a passage to a poem and to the self; an encounter of that self with an unknown and ever-changing audience.

And later Cronin speaks back to his past self and his lyrical style. In 1997 Cronin's *Even the Dead* was published, with section one "Explaining some things." In a poem entitled: "Three reasons for a mixed, umrabulo, round-the-corner poetry" he ponders whether a poem such as Keats' "Grecian urn in some colonial museum"<sup>49</sup> "obscurities: The mud of its production. / The complicity in our gaze." Kgositsile replies:

Here Keats would have found voice  
and song instead of the finality  
of deadness  
he dubs beauty and love  
though we do not see human gesture  
nor life in his Grecian Urn<sup>50</sup>

According to the ANC journal *Umrabulo*<sup>51</sup>, the word "umrabulo" was used on Robben Island to stimulate and encourage debate and discussion. The journal with the same name carries through this ideal. And indeed, embedded in the word is an antithesis of "colonial," it is a word that rolls with richness and onomatopoeia and is entirely unique to South Africa. So we move from the colonial phase which brought Keats to exilic poets through to the new South Africa where "round-the-corner" debate transforms into poetic dialogue, what Cronin calls *umrabulo*: "it is safe to assume / Nothing at all. Niks."<sup>52</sup> In this collection of poems then, Cronin

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<sup>49</sup> Jeremy Cronin, *Even the Dead: Poems, Parables and a Jeremiad*, Mayibuye History and Literature Series No.77 (Cape Town and Johannesburg: Mayibuye Books, University of the Western Cape and David Philip Publishers, 1997), 1.

<sup>50</sup> Keorapetse Kgositsile, "Montage: Bauctou Lives," in *If I Could Sing: Selected Poems* (Cape Town: Kwela/Snailpress, 2002), 82.

<sup>51</sup> African National Congress, "Umrabulo, Number 25, May 2006," African National Congress, accessed September 9, 2009, <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?include=docs/umrabulo/2006/umrabulo25.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Cronin, *Even the Dead: Poems, Parables and a Jeremiad*, 1.

intentionally turns his back on the lyric and decides to assume nothing but to address the new South Africa with new forms.

Cronin disavows a narrative of returning home. He rejects Mbeki's plea for an African Renaissance, wondering what the word itself had to do with the current problems facing poor South Africans and questioning the need to re-embody or re-invent a "new" South Africa. He prefers ambivalence and debate to assumed discourses about South Africa's past and future. In a paper on Kgositsile,<sup>53</sup> Cronin questions the continual "re" (as in "renaissance" or "rewriting" or "rediscovery") discourse in current South African politics. There are so many iterations: reconciliation, reconstruct, return, regenerate, redistribution. Cronin's uses the words "repressed," "resource," "reassuring" as I engage myself with reading, rebellion and resistance, words which do not have "re" as a root prefix but have a rhythm of possibilities. This is the Grecian Urn gap Cronin finds between poetry's "dissonance and dissidence"<sup>54</sup> and one source of exilic discontent: a continual reassessment of the past, always with a double-consciousness troubled by the beat or beatings of life.

Immersion in South Africa's poets becomes one way of reading a twentieth-century epic of South African history. We are reading, are engaged with, one South African renaissance. We know that black South African literature started with the first black journals publishing black writing in the nineteenth-century; now museums, web sites and books are devoted to this history. This was a literary renaissance given the low levels of literacy and education in South Africa. Mbeki's idea of an African renaissance included the recognition of this past, another "re" word, which sits uneasily with Cronin the activist and poet politician as being too simple, programmatic and unquestioning, too simple a narrative.

Our complicity is there only if we do not explore the mud of production.

### **Vincent Swart and David Fram: an East African encounter**

Every afternoon in the 1930s, a group of young radicals met in the East African Pavilion in Johannesburg. They chose this café with its waiters in red fezzes and curries prepared to an exacting standard to contemplate the formation of their own café which would become an intellectual hub similar to a well-known Moscow venue, the Stoilo (or Stoila) Pegasa, a Russian

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<sup>53</sup> ———, "Home Is Where the Music Is – the Poetry of Keorapetse 'Willie' Kgositsile."

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.



version of our current day poetry in pubs evenings. We know from Marcia Leveson's preface to Swart's *Collected Poems*<sup>55</sup> that this group included Vincent Swart and David Fram.

I have argued that the exile crosses boundaries of belonging which lead to uncharted worlds. The eclectic friendships which also drew Fram and Swart together seduce us with promises of South African narratives which shatter our assumptions about South African writing, people, places and politics. Why could Fram not settle into the expectations of some of his fellow Yiddish compatriots that he adopt South Africa as his home? Why did Swart choose to write in English and turn his back on his conventional Afrikaans upbringing but not his country? Could the two writers have influenced each other as they strove to make sense of the country in which they found themselves?

In her recent book *South African Literature Beyond the Cold War*, which examines the influences of Eastern Europe on South African writers, Popescu reveals that "a multifaceted fascination with Eastern Europe developed in the South African cultural imaginary throughout the twentieth-century."<sup>56</sup> Yet this fascination was more than one of literary influence and identification between writers who sought intellectual connections with Russian authors subject to similar restrictions and prohibitions on freedom of expression as themselves. We know that South Africa's apartheid governments were fiercely anti-Communist and many works of literature were banned if writers had any apparent connection with Communist or left-wing sentiments or groups. The ANC, not only for its loose alliance with the South African Communist Party, was an obvious target, as were groups or individuals with sympathies towards Stalin or Trotsky. Many exiles had lived in Eastern Europe where they were educated and trained and absorbed into very different cultural and political milieus. However there was another Eastern European influence on South African writers mentioned by Popescu in relation to the author Nadine Gordimer's family background: those Eastern European Yiddish speakers who had fled to South Africa at the turn of the century as exiles from the Russian Pale of Settlement, seeking a life where being Jewish might enable some degree of freedom. Significant writers developed from among these exiles, refugees and émigrés, as did a political activism that was to have a lasting influence "in creating the history of industrial South Africa."<sup>57</sup>

In this section we meet two poets who in some way forged a connection between Eastern Europe and South Africa and who met, if only briefly, to chat. Both were exiled from themselves

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<sup>55</sup> Vincent Swart, *Collected Poems* ed. Marcia Leveson (Johannesburg: AD. Donker, 1981), 11.

<sup>56</sup> Monica Popescu, *South African Literature Beyond the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 2.

<sup>57</sup> Taffy Adler, "Lithuania's Diaspora: The Johannesburg Jewish Workers' Club, 1928-1948," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 6, no. 1, Special Issue on Urban Social History (October, 1979), 71.

as they clung to poetry to provide stability and a sense of place within South Africa. They sought a connection with the social issues of their country, though always on the fringes, never in the midst or depth of the burgeoning literary and musical communities of the Sophiatown or Drum generations developing around them. Perhaps together they were no longer in exile.

One of these writers was the Yiddish poet David Fram who was exiled to Russia from Lithuania, leaving Russia between 1921 and 1926. So started Fram's peripatetic, wandering life. Fram had studied in Russia at a Russian worker's school and with a well-known Yiddish linguist in Lithuania, eventually joining a Yiddish group in Paris which included Marc Chagall. David Fram left for South Africa by chance, becoming part of a group of South African Yiddish writers which included J. M. Sherman and Richard Feldman.

Spitzer distinguishes between "nostalgic" and "critical" memory, recalling his childhood in Bolivia where his Jewish parents' memories of home were tinged with confusion.<sup>58</sup> On the one hand they remembered the world before the war as their home yet failed to critically retrieve the horror that cast them into exile. This latter critical memory was only revived when the future somehow seemed brighter in their feelings of belonging to their new home or country. This same double consciousness operated in Yiddish exiles in South Africa. Their poems, novels and short stories struggled with the exiling of Yiddish to Africa as they attempted to create an idea of home in their writing by tackling themes of exile such as longing, belonging and loneliness, as well as race issues, landscape and later, apartheid. The idea of engaging with the new country in the Yiddish language was a resolve common to Yiddish writers around the world who hankered for a lost physical landscape and a home represented only by a shared language; "alte hyme"<sup>59</sup> (old home) as a political entity was the source of their exile and their critical memory, both of which can dissipate at times for all exiles unless there is any hope of changing or reforming the exiling nation or hope of returning to a changed, political world. Thus common experience and language formed a close bond among people dispersed to Johannesburg, New York, Buenos Aires, London or Paris and several times David Fram himself travelled to and from Paris and London and then back to South Africa again. Yiddish poetry was widely published in all these countries.

In a different representation of exile, we will see that Breytenbach, who was in exile in Paris, struggled with his natural engagement with his own spoken language Afrikaans, the language of his homeland. Yiddish writers could form an affinity with their Afrikaans

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<sup>58</sup> Leo Spitzer, "Back through the Future: Nostalgic Memory and Critical Memory in a Refuge from Nazism," in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, eds. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (Hanover: Dartmouth College, 1999).

<sup>59</sup> Joseph Sherman, "'Singing with the Silence': The Poetry of David Fram," accessed September 30, 2010, <http://yiddish.haifa.ac.il/tmr/tmr08/tmr08001>.

compatriots as both had an intense love of their hybrid languages. This closeness reveals some fruitful literary alliances between Yiddish and Afrikaans writers (for example David Fram edited the Afrikaans journal *Horison* with the Afrikaans poet S. Ignatius Mocke),<sup>60</sup> despite an uneasy political relationship framed by official Nationalist Party Afrikaner anti-Semitism. In South Africa, Yiddish poetry became the medium through which Yiddish writers could fully articulate the unease of exile and the burden of trying to belong. They became South African by virtue of their writing and their lived engagement yet with sadness that their new home was also marked by repression, intolerance and social discrimination:

I thought at last to find my respite here,  
That here the days might bring content,  
That now no more the beckoning path would call to me  
To wander on again, to somewhere else.<sup>61</sup>

(Fram, “*Ikh hob gemeynt az do vel ikh gefinen shoyn mayn ru*”)

Sherman explains that Fram decided “to enrich Yiddish literature with an entire continent”<sup>62</sup> and his poems and operettas developed a growing level of involvement with the South African landscape and political climate. Starck’s analysis of this literature concludes that “writers wanted to alert their Yiddish readers to the injustice and inequality so prevalent in South African society”<sup>63</sup> and thus their audience was dispersed both within South Africa and abroad. Fram’s poem “In Afrike” (“In Africa”) uses the South African landscape as a symbolic and personal exploration of the development of apartheid: “out of the fullness of joy / Africa was on the verge of tears then.”<sup>64</sup> The lyric quality of Fram’s poetry in translation is sometimes found in the poems of his friend Vincent Swart where, on the whole, a bitterness and sardonic rebellion predominates.

David Fram joined Vincent Swart and others as founding members of “The Unicorn,” the group of writers, artists and sculptors who imagined a South African equivalent of the Stoilo Pegasa which had been a meeting place for the Russian poets Sergei Yesenin and Nikolai Kliuev (the latter known as the “voice of the people”).<sup>65</sup> Both poets were banned at various times and dishonoured by Stalin. So the idea of poetry for the people would have been a lively point of discussion amongst this group.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Astrid Starck, Translated by Karen-Anne Durbach, “South African Yiddish Literature and the Problem of Apartheid” *Jewish Affairs* 65, no. 1 (Pesach, 2010), 7.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> J. Alexander Ogden, “The Impossible Peasant Voice in Russian Culture: Stylization and Mimicry,” *Slavic Review* 64, no. 3 (Autumn, 2005), 524.

There is much scope for further research contrasting the authority given to the peasant voice by the Russian elite with the development of a people's voice in poetry in South Africa. Some theorists have speculated on the synergies of Romantic poetry in England and Russia and the different specificities of mimicry and genre which inform definitions of stylistic imitation of the folk poem or ballad.<sup>66</sup> In South Africa we have seen that a people's voice developed specifically through the poetry of the 1970s and '80s influenced in part by the trade union movement and the development of workers' cultural groups. As early as 1923, the Jewish Socialist Society tried to organise union activity among poorly paid Jewish workers. Adler explains that such activity was a natural extension of the "general struggle for worker's rights" which saw Yiddish become the "language of agitation and propaganda."<sup>67</sup> Yiddish culture initially divided along class lines with a Zionist group opposed by the socialist workers who had brought their politics from their experiences in the Pale of Settlement and as members of the Russian Communist Party. Barry Feinberg traces his own personal influences to this familial heritage.<sup>68</sup> Albie Sachs' father Solly Sachs became instrumental in the formation of the Garment Workers and Shop Assistant's Union while others such as Eli Weinberg, a political exile from Latvia in 1930, became General Secretary of the National Union of Commercial Travellers. Some were connected to the Jewish Worker's Club.

As the Jewish Worker's Club formed in Johannesburg

it published all its literature in Yiddish. It established a Yiddish theatre section and had an impressive Yiddish choir, often brought out on May Day to sing at various labour functions, and which was once even heard singing the Red Flag in Yiddish on the South African Broadcasting Corporation.<sup>69</sup>

Censorship was not yet widespread in South Africa and the Eastern European connection was, at this stage, irrelevant to the State radio broadcaster. This was a people's culture for Yiddish speakers. Yet Adler points out that the specific political purpose of the club was to maintain an anti-capitalist position closely aligned to the Russian Communist Party and as such to support the struggle for workers' rights in the South African context too, including raising money to support political prisoners in South Africa and elsewhere. By 1948, with the effect of World War II and the ascent of the Afrikaner nationalists in South Africa, the club had been disbanded, possibly under the eye of the State. The State issued communists with a number, for example "*genoemde Kommunis Nr. 291*"(said Communist no. 291) and then banned them, prohibiting "any social

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Adler, "Lithuania's Diaspora: The Johannesburg Jewish Workers' Club, 1928-1948," 75.

<sup>68</sup> Mark Israel and Simon Adams, "That Spells Trouble!: Jews and the Communist Party of South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26, no. 1 (March, 2000), 148.

<sup>69</sup> Adler, "Lithuania's Diaspora: The Johannesburg Jewish Workers' Club, 1928-1948," 77.

gathering, that is to say, any gathering at which the persons present also have social intercourse with one another.”<sup>70</sup>

I cannot find evidence that David Fram was a member of the Jewish Worker’s Club though he corresponded with the South African Yiddish Cultural Federation and PEN South Africa.<sup>71</sup> He edited two Yiddish newspapers and tried to engage with South African politics as he felt a great unease with the ruling oligarchy; his world was still in Eastern Europe and the Holocaust weighed heavily on his heart. Fram never lost a sense of nostalgia for the landscape of his home in Lithuania. Both Fram and Swart sent their poems out into their broader literary communities: Fram was published in major Yiddish journals and his archive shows correspondence with Yiddish writers around the world. Searching for a poetic home, Fram remained a wandering spirit which also saw him seek a home as a farmer in South Africa, a memory of his farming grandfather in Lithuania. Sherman maintains that “the long narrative ‘*Vilyam Skot*’ is, for its time, a sensitive tribute to those whites who were struggling courageously to advance the social and political development of the black majority in South Africa.”<sup>72</sup> Fram’s poetic style develops alongside the poetic lyricism of the poet Vincent Swart who Fram encountered in the East African Pavilion discussing, as well as drinking, coffee,<sup>73</sup> perhaps meeting through common acquaintances who had connections with the Communist Party and various socialist groups as well as the ANC. The artist Lippy Lipschitz, part of “The Unicorn” group, sculpted a bust of Fram and painted Vincent Swart too. Fram lived long after these conversations were a distant memory, passing away in 1988 at the age of eighty-five, still writing poetry which Sherman calls the “Yiddish romanticism” of an African Yiddish poet.

We are swept up in these exilic tales viewed through our own twenty-first century romantic aesthetic which sees the life of Vincent Swart as that of a poet-activist whose own restlessness was unnecessarily and arbitrarily cut short by his circumstances. No one has applied the epithet of romantic to Vincent Swart though we could read his life differently as being in synergy with Fram’s. Swart travelled too, to New York and England, and in about 1946 joined

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<sup>70</sup> South Africa. Department of Justice, "File No. 2/1/1023 Swart, Edward Vincent. Correspondence," 1959-1978, Letter addressed to Edward Vincent Swart from Balthazar Joahannes Vorster, 11<sup>th</sup>, December 1962 being a Notice in terms of Sub-Section (1) of Section Nine of the Suppression of Communism Act, 1950 (Act No.44 of 1950).

<sup>71</sup> David Fram, “David Fram Papers, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.”

<sup>72</sup> Sherman, “‘Singing with the Silence’: The Poetry of David Fram.”

<sup>73</sup> Swart, *Collected Poems*, 11. In fact Fram recounted to Leveson that they had hoped that “the artists and writers would serve coffee to their patrons” (Ibid). Further citations of this work are given in the text.

the Worker's International League which had ties with the Communist Party of South Africa; the latter included members of the Jewish Worker's Club.<sup>74</sup>

Why was this spirited, larger-than-life Renaissance man in effect exiled from himself, so that his later poetry reveals a tired, ill, though thoughtful person struggling with immanent death?

In 1962 a short article in the *Daily Mirror* of December 17<sup>th</sup>, 1962 reported the death of "the poet Vincent Swart":

Cambridge-educated Mr. Vincent Swart, 46, former lecturer at Johannesburg University [sic] who was banned from political activities because of his views on apartheid. Was found dead in a Johannesburg hotel at the weekend. He said last week that he wanted to return to England, but the South African Government refused to grant him a passport.<sup>75</sup>

By 1981, Marcia Leveson (whose letter to the Department of Justice requesting permission to publish Swart's poems is included in File No. 241/1023) was able to bring out an edition of Vincent Swart's *Collected Poems* as on his death, his poems were no longer regarded as banned. Leveson felt that it was time to "establish his rightful and important place among the South African English poets" (7). She paints a picture of a man engaged in political activism as well as being an intellectual, and known as a brilliant student who was mentored at Cambridge by I. A. Richards. He wrote to T. S. Eliot, receiving a courteous reply and had poetry published in anthologies with Wallace Stevens and Saul Bellow. Yet, Leveson writes, Swart "remained very much an exile, or at best, a displaced person" (8). Certainly his poetry and his promising career as a poet were effectively silenced with his banning in 1960. Swart became no-one's *cause célèbre* and as a poet he effectively disappeared, known instead as an activist for his involvement in radical activities. Comparing Swart to South African poets of the 1940s and 1950s, Peter Horn believes Swart "is still waiting to be evaluated as the one major poet of his generation."<sup>76</sup> He sees Swart as the missing South African link in the modernist pantheon which includes Eliot and Auden.

Which poetic encounters inform our comparisons and judgements? In Swart's "Africa" (31) the violent imagery "Why did the crocodile rape the raven / And urgent pregnancy compelled / To breed her blackness here!" while an obvious ironic reference to white settlement in Africa, might be read as an oblique drift to Swart's heritage from an Afrikaans father and English-speaking mother; Swart is born Swart, the Afrikaans word for black. Swart's Africa is a far cry from Fram's lyrical infusion of his longing for home with his witness of a society in

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<sup>74</sup> Israel and Adams, "That Spells Trouble!: Jews and the Communist Party of South Africa."

<sup>75</sup> "Found Dead after Ban," *Daily Mirror* December 17, 1962, 15.

<sup>76</sup> Peter Horn, "Vincent Swart or the Malaise of South African Poetry," (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, n.d.).

conflict: “Africa was on the verge of tears.” Do we compare Swart’s “Africa” with Ingoapele Madingoane’s “Africa my beginning”<sup>77</sup> where “they came from the west / sailing to the east / with hatred and disease flowing from their flesh”? Written in 1980 forty years after Swart’s poem, there is more commonality here. However, Swart also wrote love poems in a form similar to Brutus: In “Your eyes are sunlight on a broken vase” (50) we find a suddenly compelling line: “You are a curve in your leaf” broken by “the inflicted self bitters, stirring a dull bough.” Leveson finds a mix of lyricism with the ever-present “imagery of disease” (14), trying to wrestle political consciousness with personal doubt, drink and insomnia. Swart’s awareness of the writing process is more prevalent than any overt reference to his Afrikaans relatives, Swart having spoken English from childhood: “I have been in this poem and others a small contributor” (“I am tired of writing down on a sheet of blank paper,” 57), “for is it not the peel and bluster of the actual / That makes the poem?” (“Spinning a poem,” 61), “I do not want your ordered poetry / I do not want words on a platter” (“My nonsense and clarity in excited words mount,” 62) as “The lines of poetry lance and leap” (“The lines of poetry,” 63). Yet for all Swart’s desire to “destroy language,” unlike Horn I find his “lexical variety”<sup>78</sup> limited if we compare him to other poets discussed in this thesis. It is not Swart’s poetry that could offend the regime, for even sexual desire is muted:

These doors do not open with handle and hand  
 But only when body, big, spreads with desire  
 And lips flourish in the red-throated full bulb  
 Of our longing  
 (“These doors do not open with handle and hand,” 36)

We find a similarity with these lines by David Fram:

In that hour I longed to bloom  
 as the orange blooms  
 to be drunk with her nectar  
 tossed in the softness of her hair  
 and for a moment to forget  
 and be forgiven  
 released from my suffering  
 as a prisoner longs for sleep  
 and dreams of the beauty of the petals.  
 She came to console me  
 With her steps of light.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ingoapele Madingoane, *Africa My Beginning* (London: Rex Collings, 1980), 27.

<sup>78</sup> Horn, “Vincent Swart or the Malaise of South African Poetry,” 3.

<sup>79</sup> David Fram, Translated by Marcia Leveson,, “Songs to a Woman Such as You ('Friling,' in *a Shvalb Oyfn Dakh*, 9). (Reprinted in Sherman, Joseph. "Singing with the Silence': The Poetry of David Fram." <http://Yiddish.Haifa.Ac.II/Tmr/Tmr08/Tmr08001>),” *Jewish Affairs* 46, no. 2 (September 1991).

An immensely gregarious individual, Swart's poetry is infused not with politics but with intellectual and romantic ruminations and meanderings being influenced by the Imagists and Dylan Thomas. His Cambridge poetry shows a disavowal for direct political comment but a penchant for ballads as in his well-known poem "Casey Jones" which was published in several anthologies (3): "Oh where was he going? He didn't quite know." (35) The reception of Swart's poetry was thus confined to a limited audience in England and the South African academic world where Swart lectured briefly at the University of the Witwatersrand. Perhaps his poems were known to the East African Pavilion group and influenced or were influenced by Fram. We can imagine Swart's idealism reflected in his conversations. He experimented with various movements like the South African Labour Party and the International Worker's League which based its principles on Trotsky before becoming the South African founder of a marginal international group called the Movement for a Democracy of Content. Being both an Afrikaner and a communist, Swart quickly came to the attention of the South African government, particularly when his movement was partially involved in the organization of bus boycotts in two Johannesburg townships in 1955 and 1957.

It was with great apprehension that I opened a thick envelope from South Africa containing a copy of the police and state dossier on Edward Vincent Swart<sup>80</sup> which I had obtained under South Africa's new and liberal Freedom of Information legislation. Words and names symbolic of the fear and horror of the past now lay open on my desk as the strong, muscular and swaggering Sydney currawong moaned and wailed its way home, a dismal sound at the best of times. No imaginative or strident voice could have prepared me for Balthazar Johannes Vorster's signature on several sheets spread out alongside the work of our exilic poets.

In retrospect it is not surprising that I gathered the Swart papers and filed them, turning instead to the poems and almost forgetting to consider the envelope's chilling contents. Let us then consider them, *inter alia*.

Documented surveillance of Swart begins in 1949 and gathers intensity towards his death. Several memoranda give a brief biography of Swart including that he was born in Heilbron in the Orange Free State on June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1911 and that he studied at the University of the Witwatersrand as well as in England. The State decrees this is Swart's life: that he associates with "Blacks" and regularly visits Alexandra Township. Since 1953, he attended 36 gatherings and spoke at 24. Every meeting is summarised. The State provides us with those extracts from Swart's speeches it deems reprehensible. In addition to the movements mentioned earlier, he is also listed as associating with a "Movement for Reconquest of Africa, Peoples of Nkanghla,

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<sup>80</sup> South Africa. Department of Justice, "File No. 2/1/1023 Swart, Edward Vincent. Correspondence."



Standholders and Tenant's Association, the Transvaal Indian Congress and the People's Transport Action Committee."<sup>81</sup> The State draws attention to a speech in 1960 when Swart said: "I say Africa for the Africans" and "I am here as a white man and I want to stand for you."<sup>82</sup> On 30<sup>th</sup> March, 1960 Swart is finally arrested and held in Pretoria Central. On his release he is prohibited for five years from "being in any magisterial district in the Union except the magisterial district of Kempton Park."<sup>83</sup> So begins Swart's battle for survival.

Throughout the period covered by this correspondence, 1959 to 1962, Swart continued to write poetry. In his moving poem "This is not a poem but a proem" (68) Swart ruminates on his observations of his own decline:

But to come back, back to you my friend  
Shake my hand and you shake not only unexasperated blossom  
But you shake sap. You take me in to put me out –  
The diastole and systole of life anywhere.  
When I was really up and dressed I fell over a beam  
And discovered as Keats once said that wood is wooden.

He bows to Keats to discover the substance of nature, of himself, the fluid sap that is himself wherever he might be. The harsher his personal circumstances, made so by banning, imprisonment and house arrest, the clearer his writing becomes as "the poetry leaves me / maybe on a trek to a foreign country? . . . I cannot sleep at night for the damage and the stir" ("The poetry leaves me," 70). He writes: "How long is it now that I have been punished / By the outstripped moment" where 'I have sat for years with cornered / Anguish, in an irritation of hope" (74) ("Affirmation," 73), a considered, weary call from a man aware of the results of his actions yet trying to keep a sense of his own spirit alive. Hope here is not an optimistic outlook but an irritation that he should hope while he feels an anguish he cannot dispel or displace. It is Swart himself who becomes displaced, exiled.

Swart continued to write poetry even as his health declined due to drinking and his political activities intensified. Leveson tells us that a fellow prisoner recalls how "he once enthralled a prison audience by putting on as entertainment for them a scholarly lecture on the poetry of Hopkins" (22). Under house arrest, Swart had tried to escape to England and what was then called Tanganyika (Tanzania) where Julius Nyerere had offered him sanctuary. His refuge became his words.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.,3/50/140, Verslag: Edward Vincent Swart, 3.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> South Africa. Department of Justice, "File No. 2/1/1023 Swart, Edward Vincent. Correspondence," Prohibition in Terms of Section 3(5) of the Riotous Assemblies Act, 1956 (Act No.17 of 1965) signed by Francois Christiaan Erasmus, Minister of Justice.

It is heartbreaking to read the correspondence between Swart's lawyers and the South African Police and various Ministers of Justice as the lawyers try to enable Swart to make a living from his chicken farm or to visit his lawyers to discuss his divorce or his confinement. The state believed that "any extension in the area in which SWART [sic] may move (especially if it includes the magisterial district of Johannesburg) would be defeating the very object for which prohibition was issued."<sup>84</sup> Further they contend that his chicken farm suffered "just as much during the days and nights he spent away from home whilst engaged in political activities, as also during the months he was detained (i.e. during the State of Emergency)."<sup>85</sup> Many of these later letters and memoranda are initialled six times. The State was very busy with its business of repression.

In desperation, on January 29<sup>th</sup>, 1962 Swart was compelled to write to the notorious Balthazar Johannes Vorster, then the Minister for Justice:

Sir,

I wish to inform you that I have broken my ban. On Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> January, I was rushed off to the nearest nursing home..critically ill with double pneumonia." I have now broken my ban again, as I left the hospital on the 18<sup>th</sup>, and came, under doctor's orders, to stay with friends at the above address.

This is a defiant letter but also an appeal. How can a sick man pose any threat? Swart's poems continued unabated being the air from which he breathed as his life shrunk and shrivelled with restriction after restriction. The correspondence to and fro from Swart, lawyers, police, Ministers, Secretaries, by hand and secret, becomes ludicrous; the surveillance no longer active.

His poem "I am sick" (90) conveys his state of mind as well as his physical decline:

I am sick, oh yes, I am sick;  
There's a bundle of sticks and a trickle of snot in my nose.  
There's a cough that fills my chest like active lightning.  
But these are the pleasures of health and friends.  
The stinging may be when the world wants you to work.  
A bad wind blows through the teeth of my mouth;  
Weeds grow over the mauled crumbings of my heart.

In a typewritten memo marked Secret, the Acting Commissioner of the South African Police writes to The Secretary for Justice granting a departure permit "No.P.02066" for Edward Vincent Swart. In handwriting at the bottom is a note dated 16<sup>th</sup> October, 1962: "uncertain whether he has in fact left the republic." We do not know if Swart even received this notification.

It is particularly chilling to translate a letter in Afrikaans sent by the then Secretary for Justice, S.J. Renke, to the Magistrate of Johannesburg informing him of Swart's death. The letter

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., No.S1/1439 Suid-Afrikaanse Polisie 1895, Letter to the Secretary for Justice from the Commissioner of the South African Police.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 3/50/140 Secret. Letter from The Minister.

is dated 2/1/63. The Afrikaans word *beskik* in the context of the letter translates as “Swart, according to information the department *has at its disposal* (beskik) died on 15<sup>th</sup> December 1962.”<sup>86</sup> The word “beskik” can also translate as manage, arrange, dispose. Certainly it appears that Swart was possibly driven to his death by the banning order dated 11<sup>th</sup> December 1962 and signed by Vorster. In a secret letter from the Secretary of Justice to the Magistrate of Johannesburg hand signed 18/12/62 a day after Swart’s death on 17<sup>th</sup> December 1962, the State is still at work outlining the restrictions it had placed on him. The mechanisms of surveillance, concoctions of detail, imagination and swagger, rather like the beady-eyed currawong, sneer at Swart’s everyday life and death. It is not surprising our friend David Fram exiled himself from the everyday and hid within his beloved Yiddish, “gladly hid in solitude.”<sup>87</sup>

The State had decreed that Swart had engaged in “activities which are furthering or are calculated to further the achievement of any of the objects of communism,”<sup>88</sup> seen to be a crime of momentous import at that stage of South Africa’s history. Popescu points out that a real, as well as an imaginary influence was created by the government “to paint Russians as devils incarnate: anti-Christian, revolutionary and imperialist.”<sup>89</sup> To make matters worse, Swart was a part-Afrikaner, whose first cousin C. R. (Blackie) Swart went on to become the first State President of South Africa in 1961. “Blackie” Swart did nothing to assist his cousin who was seen to have betrayed not only his fellow-Afrikaners but also his country and the future of his countrymen (white Afrikaners).

By the end of 1962, Swart was dead as “death in its glow and its darkest moment / Threatens me with a loud-mouthed grave” (“I have come to the long end of the road,” 93).

Leveson relates that Swart is well remembered by Deborah Mabiletsa, who was vice-President of the Black Women’s Federation, fellow members of the Movement for a Democracy of Content, as well as all those involved in the successful bus boycott protest in Alexandra Township in 1955 which started grass-roots community organization in this part of the city and where his ashes, at his request, were scattered. He would surely have been remembered by David Fram.

His name and his poetry remain elusive, an exile to all but his friends.

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<sup>86</sup> S.J. Renke, *Beperkings: Edward Vincent Swart* (January 1, 1963).

<sup>87</sup> Fram, David. “Thus I cast behind the town,” trans. Joseph Sherman, in Sherman, “*Singing with the Silence: The Poetry of David Fram*,” n.p.

<sup>88</sup> South Africa. Department of Justice, “File No. 2/1/1023 Swart, Edward Vincent. Correspondence,” Letter addressed to Edward Vincent Swart from Balthazar Johannes Vorster, 11<sup>th</sup>, December 1962 being a Notice in terms of Sub-Section (1) of Section Nine of the Suppression of Communism Act, 1950 (Act No.44 of 1950).

<sup>89</sup> Popescu, *South African Literature Beyond the Cold War*, 12.

## Dennis Brutus in Defence of Poetry

I now wish to turn to the lyrical poetry of the exiled South African Dennis Brutus to briefly laud his use of language as resistance.

Dennis Brutus was to become a member of the Teachers' League after graduating with a B. A. from Fort Hare College in 1947, one of only two Blacks from the Port Elizabeth area to gain a bursary to study there. He reached this path via Paterson High school in Port Elizabeth where he edited the student newspaper *The Patersonian Spectator*. In 1948 he took up a post as an English and Afrikaans teacher at the Catholic St. Thomas Aquinas High School in Port Elizabeth, disregarding the set syllabus and agitating against the Bantu Education Act.

In 1961 Brutus was initially banned from public gatherings for five years due to his attempts to promote multiracial sporting groups in South Africa. He had correctly read sport as the heart of apartheid's attempts to demonstrate participation in world affairs. His banning order was followed by imprisonment, attempted escape and then incarceration on the notorious Robben Island, with five months in solitary confinement. In prison "my poems were to me like a harbour of security in this complete abandonment by the world; at least this was a sure accomplishment, these poems had an existence, and all the rest was not in my power."<sup>90</sup> Thus poetry came to represent an independent self, a home.

When Brutus sent his selection of poems (*Sirens, Knuckles, Boots*) to Mbari Publications in Nigeria in 1962, he did so in defiance of the South African Minister of Justice who had banned his words, his teaching and his attendance at public gatherings. Brutus's concern with Africa and the outside world are immediately apparent: if his voice could not be heard in South Africa he would take it to the rest of Africa where the sounds (though not the legislation) of apartheid, ("the siren," "the thunder," "the shriek of nerves") might be familiar to other Africans. These sounds become "my sounds - the sirens, knuckles, boots."

Upon release, Brutus left South Africa on an exit permit rather than submit to continual harassment and ongoing silencing and continued his campaign to have South Africa excluded from world sporting events, in particular, from the Olympic Games.

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<sup>90</sup> Renato Berger, "Interview with Dennis Brutus," *Geneve-Afrique/Geneva-Africa* 18, no. 2 (1980), 77.

To publish and be heard, Brutus used a whole list of pseudonyms including, apparently, the name Hal Ketchup.<sup>91</sup> He published a book of poems in Texas in 1970 under the name John Bruin called *Thoughts abroad* which was later republished in a broader collection.<sup>92</sup> The pun here is on the word “Bruin,” the Afrikaans word for brown. What is noticeable in much of Brutus’s writing is his sense of humour, his colloquial appeal to the ordinary, the everyday, as if this could create a shared space within the horror — a cathartic space for laughter.

Much has been written about Brutus’s image of himself as a troubadour, an image critics have read as inappropriate as being drawn from Western chivalric, romantic literature, the notion of an exotic figure from Western history somehow transported to Africa. Yet for Brutus his act of defiance is more important than his identification with nation or continent as is his further involvement in the face of banning, his laughter “disdaining those who banned inquiry,” “quixoting till a cast-off of my land” and “singing” (“A troubadour, I tr averse all my land,” 2), taking a moral stance against apartheid or injustice in any sphere of life. He is a troubadour in the same way as Shelley, that upper-class English poet, became a troubadour in his defence of what he designated as poetry; or Wole Sokinya who has maintained his rage against comparative ideologies which deny language the right to ascribe value. Take “troubadour” out of history and assign it the value of poet and we can locate the heart of exile in the poetry of Dennis Brutus: “Somehow,” he writes, “we survive / and tenderness, frustrated, does not wither” (“Somehow we survive,” 4). Brutus’s freedom to use language defiantly can be seen as exemplifying Homi Bhaba’s notion of the “enunciative presence,”<sup>93</sup> in which words are used creatively, freely across temporal bounds to confuse the clearly defined spaces of pre-determined theoretical concepts. Let us place our troubadour then in Africa.

Brutus’s early poems are lyrical explorations of language determined to resist duress, stress or obliteration. Many are nature poems which resemble those of the Romantic poets he admired so much. As with Said, the counterpoint of music and meaning or referent and aesthetic is never far from Brutus’s poetic preoccupations - the “andantes through his head” (“Waiting (South African Style): ‘Non-Whites Only,’” 11) carry thoughts which throw the perversity of apartheid into the reader’s path, and in 1961, after the Sharpeville massacre, demanded some response.

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<sup>91</sup> Andrew Martin, Personal email correspondence with the author.

<sup>92</sup> Dennis Brutus, *A Simple Lust: Selected Poems Including Sirens Knuckles Boots, Letters to Martha, Poems from Algiers, Thoughts Abroad* (London: Heinemann, 1973). Further citations of this work are given in the text.

<sup>93</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 178.

These poems are suffused with a yearning drawn through images of the body. In some the body is in pain: “bruised though we must be...our bones may later sing” (“This sun on this rubble after rain,” 9) or is a source of pleasure and peace, “the quiet wisdom of the body’s peace,” (“No Banyan, Only,” 14) or is a sensual instrument drawn from images of the land:

dear my land,  
open for my possessing,  
ravaged and dumbly submissive to our will,  
in curves and uplands my sensual delight mounts  
 (“Erosion: Transkei,” 16)

Lee has argued that the Romantic writers made Africa a site of desire; here Brutus reclaims that right as an African, one who truly belongs to Africa. Land is often compared to a woman’s body, the notion of desire being quite commonplace when you are deprived, in everyday life, of everything considered natural. Love for a country and its land are the last enduring elements of the exile. When the initial trauma or joy of separation/exile has been resolved, after assimilation or adaptation to a new culture has been broached, what remains is a connection to the physicality of land - the words of love transfigured from the heart of an exile’s dilemma. As the self tries to adjust, the suppressed self recreates a sense of belonging and attachment through images of the land. Doubt does not abate. As Brutus writes: “even my love poems have their roots in suppression and anxiety,”<sup>94</sup> in other words, in the distressed self.

In the poem “Nightsong: City,” (18) a not yet imprisoned or physically exiled Brutus is already in exile, his status as a person denied him and his language outlawed. What is remarkable about this poem is the lack of anger. You could argue that the lyric is too calm and soothing, like a lullaby, but this lullaby is one of “bug-infested rags” and “creaking iron-sheets.”

During his imprisonment Brutus made a conscious decision to pare down his writing, to strip it of embellishments, to speak plainly. In an interview in 1980, he said:

Eighteen months hard labour, most of which I spent at Robben Island, breaking stone and working in a quarry. All this showed me very clearly that I would never have freedom or a human existence in this country, but only the life of a slave who is in permanent danger as is the case for all the blacks, unless they make some arrangements with the White Government.<sup>95</sup>

Brutus had to write his way to a kind of freedom. For him, it was exile which could free him from enslavement. His exile poems reflect this struggle to find or to define this concept of freedom as he travels the world to promote the sports boycott of South Africa:

when you go on a campus in Australia or elsewhere, one of the problems you have to contend with is not merely the ignorance and innocence of the people you speak to, but when they have this kind of unpleasant knowledge thrust upon them, they

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<sup>94</sup> Berger, “Interview with Dennis Brutus,” 77.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 76.

dislike it. It's really a nuisance to have this problem dumped on your doorstep and to be told you've got some responsibility for it.<sup>96</sup>

This is Homi Bhaba's unhomely world:

to live in the unhomely world, to find its ambivalencies and ambiguities acted in the house of fiction, or its sundering or splitting performed in the work of art, is also to affirm a profound desire for social solidarity.<sup>97</sup>

In the poem Brutus wrote in Sydney, Australia, "I must lug my battered body / Garbage-littered / Across the frontiers of the world" as "a supple suppliant," he winces "in the tense air of recognition / As the clean-limbed, simple and innocent grow / Hostile" (I must lug my battered body. . . 130).

In the unhomely world, a world of hostility and of the clean-limbed (an image written as emblematic of German Aryan mythology), words of appeal to a moral conscience are seen as a reproach, a threat and a challenge. The bearer of moral representation becomes, in this act of splitting, the threat. This expression of, and appeal to, a representation of humanism has its roots in the Romantic period. Shelley urged readers to recognize in poetry the ability to change humankind by example. In another poem written as he travelled the world, Brutus sees the possibility of this becoming: "I yearn towards the heaving earth" where "all the world is mine and to love / and all of its humankind" (I yearn towards the heaving earth . . . 131).

For South Africans in exile, exile itself was a connectedness with the outside world denied to those in exile within their own country. As the keynote speaker at a conference in London in 1992 entitled *Dreaming of the Homeland: International Conference of African Writers in Exile*,<sup>98</sup> Brutus spoke of the homeland as a dream, a sentiment echoed in the writings of many exiles for whom the state of globalization or post-coloniality is a state of exile, of homelessness and a searching for a language or voice with which to express this loss. There is a double entendre, an irony in Brutus's speech, indeed in the conference as a whole: homelands formed the corner stone of the apartheid policy. People were banished to areas called "homelands" which were legislated homelands, regardless of where people had previously lived or worked. The language of apartheid had corrupted the idea of home. Brutus's dream homeland which envisaged the creation of a new space, a new South Africa, was being written in other often unpublished texts in and outside South Africa during the apartheid years. These texts created a language only now being revealed or published as an archival testimony to a vibrant

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<sup>96</sup> Dennis Brutus, "Poetry of Suffering: The Black Experience," *Ba Shiru* 4, no. 2 (1973), 4.

<sup>97</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 18.

<sup>98</sup> Oguibe, Olu. "Meeting Dennis Brutus," *Sentinel Literary Quarterly* 3, no.2 (January 2010), accessed 5<sup>th</sup> May 2010, <http://www.sentinelpoetry.org.uk/slq/3.2/essays/olu-oguibet.htm>.

culture developing in parallel to the texts of obfuscation which dominated the language of repression.

Dennis Brutus used the act of writing, I have argued, to represent a defiant reclamation (or inscription) of language: here language used in poetry in whatever way Brutus wished, to say whatever he wanted to say, to become the home denied an exile, a move from placing or locating self through poetry to selflessness in lyrical acts of resistance. Brutus's poetry affirms Shelley's defence of poetry where the *act* of writing resistance is read as a natural opposition to political repression and inequality. This moral representation of self, as well as the ability to move beyond and outside the self, is an act of courage and of altruism which lies at the heart of the exilic experience.

### **An Altruistic Gaze: the poetry of Breyten Breytenbach**

Percy Bysshe Shelley's writing received a mixed reception during his life. Leigh Hunt decided not to publish "The Mask of Anarchy" in *The Examiner*, as he felt "the public at large had not become sufficiently discerning to do justice to the sincerity and kind-heartedness of the spirit that walked in this flaming robe of verse."<sup>99</sup> Shelley himself concealed the details of his authorship of *Queen Mab* which was quietly distributed underground due to its provocative political content and condemnation of wealth, power, religion and oppression. The drama of Shelley's life and his early death led to a public appropriation of his personality and a campaign by Leigh Hunt and Mary Shelley to elevate Shelley as a major and important writer, poet and activist despite contemporaneous ambivalence about his pronouncements on political events of his time such as slavery, and his belief that writing could disturb the existing order or balance of the establishment. It was this controversial anti-establishment stance that endeared him to subsequent writers and political activists, and we have seen that he was often evoked by South African poets or ANC leaders for his calls to action or moral resistance to oppressive legislation or governments. I mention Shelley here just as I will discuss Paul Celan, as there are points of comparison between both writers and Breyten Breytenbach. We inevitably weave in and out of the autobio/bio/geo/graphies of these poets as we sift through the vast body of writing by, and about, their prose, poetry and speeches as well as the contemporary public reception of these, some prompted by public responses to the tragedies attached to their lives. While the notion,

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<sup>99</sup> Edward Aveling, Eleanor Marx Aveling, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley's Socialism and Popular Songs Wholly Political, and Destined to Awaken and Direct the Imagination of the Reformers*, Journeyman Chapbook (London: The Journeyman Press, 1979), 40.



concept or reality of exile has, in one way or another, informed the work of so many poets of the twentieth-century, the appropriation of intensely personal dilemmas into the public arena, whether sought or thrust upon Breyten Breytenbach, has shaped his poetic output.

If the idea of exile is read as a romantic one, grounded in the Bible, mythology and legends, tales, oral history, poetry, then the idea, call it a trope, continues to evolve, so that in the modern and postmodern worlds, the metamorphosis, the more-than-an-idea, becomes a recurrent reality that grounds the poetry of writers such as Shelley, Celan and Breytenbach in the tragedies and politics of their age. I have called this direct positioning of their poetry towards the reader the altruistic gaze. Shelley, Celan and Breytenbach and the other South African poets discussed in this chapter speak to us across time and constructs, their intention being to use writing as a means of addressing us directly, as a gesture towards what could be: an altruistic solidarity towards active recognition that language can be reconstructed from the past to engage with current ethical issues. Lewis Nkosi proposed the moral intention of literature as the great project for African writers.<sup>100</sup> Here I examine how exile constructed a representation of apartheid South Africa for Breytenbach in poetry that becomes a personal and active resistance to the existing power structures of the time.

There are parallels between the predicaments Paul Celan and Breyten Breytenbach confronted by writing in languages which were also the language of an oppressor. Celan was awarded the Buchner Prize by the German Academy of Language and Literature in 1960 and used the occasion to give a speech on the ethical role of poetry.<sup>101</sup> Eshel argues convincingly that Celan conceived of the poem as “the outcast,” so that poetry, by breaking with tradition, by confronting common discourses, becomes “the radical other to discursive language.”<sup>102</sup> Celan preferred a multitude of selves shattered through writing rather than an inclusive all-embracing “I,” the very “I” broken by being exiled. The same currents of thought led Breytenbach to radicalize his use of Afrikaans and to break his identity into numerous Breytenbachs through his prose and poetry. In 1973 he used the occasion of an invitation to a University of Cape Town Summer School on the topic of the Sestigers to both identify with and dissociate himself from the Afrikaans language “We are a bastard people with a bastard language”<sup>103</sup> – and went on to appeal to the humanness of memory, particularly in the relationship between poetry and politics.

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<sup>100</sup> Stiebel and Gunner, eds., *Still Beating the Drum: Critical Perspectives on Lewis Nkosi*.

<sup>101</sup> Amir Eshel, “Paul Celan’s Other: History, Poetics and Ethics,” *New German Critique* no. 91, Special Issue on Paul Celan (2004).

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>103</sup> Breyten Breytenbach, *A Season in Paradise*, trans. Rike Vaughan (New York: Persea Books, 1980), 156.

There are resonances of Derrida and Celan in this speech as he despaired that the death of memory meant the end of hope.<sup>104</sup>

Breytenbach's prolific writing is marked, or informed by, an absence which diminishes as his writing moves ever closer to apartheid's demise. Initially we find the obvious presence of his love of family and landscape, his ambivalence and then acceptance of his background as an Afrikaner writing in the Afrikaans language, his examination of the tenets of Buddhism and his struggle with being an exile. Then the broader Africa, as an equal presence, starts to pervade Breytenbach's writing as a reality in both his prose and poetry, and finally in his active engagement with African countries other than South Africa.

This global positioning was present in many South African writers in exile as they sought to establish themselves as writers within Africa (for example Mphahlele, Brutus, and Nkosi). The ANC itself had many African bases which provided assistance to exiles. As we have seen, Mphahlele and Nkosi (*Home and Exile*) grappled with this relationship. Nkosi discussed the peculiar position of exiled African intellectuals who felt estranged from some of the traditional aspects of their society but were equally dismissive of the colonial systems which supplied the education to nurture a privileged few. Early on he formed the view that only engagement with African history and culture would provide the basis for the development of a multiplicity of African identities, and dismissed Eliot's wasteland as "that European anxiety" that "strikes us as a little self-indulgent, if not an improbable joke."<sup>105</sup> This was a constant dilemma, of how far to accept colonial influence. Nkosi has deliberately quoted Wordsworth and alluded to Shelley's "poet as legislator" in *Home and Exile*, using Matthew Arnold's "darkling plain" to remind readers in Africa to question the emotions it might evoke,<sup>106</sup> an imported sentiment.

A wariness of how emotion can be manipulated in writing and reading troubles both Nkosi and Breytenbach. In spite of Breytenbach's contact with exiled Africans in Paris, it is only in his later writing that we sense that he has sought a global African identity despite the constant representations of South Africa in his writing. Both Breytenbach and Nkosi were visionaries, Breytenbach for trying to form an African Afrikaans identity in his writing, and Nkosi for moving the debate on the moral purpose of literature forward beyond Sartre and Senghor.

Exile, with all its historical, biblical and contemporary overtones, came suddenly and unexpectedly to Breytenbach. He had left South Africa in 1961 trying to establish himself as a painter. He wrote some poetry in Afrikaans which was subsequently published in South Africa in

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>105</sup> Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 51.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 46.

a new Afrikaans journal: the *Sestiger*. The 1960s saw a burgeoning of poetry in the Afrikaans literary world which coincided with a period of great repression in South Africa. Progressive Afrikaans writing was championed as a coming of age for the Afrikaner nation in and through Breytenbach and others, and was triumphantly seen to have a continental thread that went back through the surrealists and existentialists to the French symbolists of the 1890s. With the *Sestigers*, Breytenbach had found an audience and soon became a literary success in South Africa, primarily among Afrikaners, only becoming an “official” and unwilling exile in 1964 when he and his wife, a Vietnamese-Parisian, were refused a visa into South Africa where Breytenbach had been given a literary award. South African law viewed the marriage as illegal, defining it as inter-racial and Yolande (Breytenbach’s wife) as ‘non-white’. Negatives were intruding into Breytenbach’s otherwise highly successful literary and artistic career.

In 1961, Breytenbach arrived in Paris. This was the year South Africa became a republic and President Verwoerd declared that the future of South Africa lay in “separate development.” The repressive political climate in South Africa was a far cry from the currents of existentialism and rebellion, the Algerian crisis and Vietnam which informed much French public life in the 1960s and ’70s. Any form of activism was suppressed in South Africa. In Paris, Derrida was by now teaching at the Sorbonne and Celan was publishing poetry which confronted the aftermath of the Holocaust and the use of German as a valid poetic language after Auschwitz. Breytenbach met another South African Afrikaner in Paris, André Brink, who returned to South Africa and eventually had the “honour” of becoming the first Afrikaans writer to have a novel banned. Through the bannings and censorship of the 1960s, “Afrikaans writers escaped for ten years without a single banning.”<sup>107</sup> As a novelist and academic, Brink used his literary status within South Africa to promote cultural activism. Both were in Paris in 1968 and were clearly politicised by the events of that year.

A noticeable trope in the exilic imaginary is that the present, exiled home becomes an absence in the poetry. It is often represented by differences in weather, the snow, the winter, and the north versus the south, different streets, or the differences in nature, trees, landscape. Emphasis is on the absent home, South Africa, which, whether scripted in terms of nature or landscape, becomes a lived memory and hence is defined as a continuum of what home could be. It is only when Breytenbach found himself in prison in South Africa that Paris is vividly evoked in the poem “In Rue Monsieur-le-prince,” a love poem to his wife, where “a honey-comb of

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<sup>107</sup> Jack Cope, *The Adversary Within: Dissident Writers in Afrikaans* (Cape Town: David Phillip, 1982), 76.

freedom” is “as long ago now as May sixty-eight.”<sup>108</sup> But in most of Breytenbach’s poetry, South Africa is clearly the longed-for home, whether by the words, phrases and idioms he uses, or the imagery, voices, characters. Despite Breytenbach’s ambivalence towards the idea of exile, his poetry shouts a representation of South Africa at the reader, trying to persuade us that he is not an exile, and we are convinced. The poem becomes the medium of revoking exile, as it did for Celan. In the debate about the relationship between literature, ethics and politics, it is clear that Celan and Breytenbach, like Shelley before them, saw poetry as reaching beyond the *comfort* of words. Exile is no longer *romantic*.

Breytenbach was to embark on a long journey from an early, ambiguous relationship with South Africa (where the constant in his writing is his love of the landscape and his family and its traditions) and the Afrikaans language and Afrikaners, to the clearer certainty of his political stance and his representations of the relationship of poetry to politics. Reading his earlier writing, the influence of French surrealists is present in the dramatic confessional or revolutionary mode of expression and ideas appear to change and jump from frame to frame, poem to poem. Certainly the coverage given to Breytenbach in the press compared to that of any other South African poet in or outside South Africa was due to the fact that Breytenbach was white and an Afrikaner who wrote in Afrikaans, a rebel who courted notoriety in his desire and intent to rebel against a conservative political inheritance. Perhaps conscious of having the privilege of a wide audience, the trajectory of Breytenbach’s writings takes a path of confusion and self-doubt, of bravado and insightful observation. His thoughts on the nature of exile appear to address the many journalists courting his views while he seeks some kind of redemption for what have been seen as cowardly or foolish acts of compliance and resistance. Breytenbach’s writing both distrusts and embraces the meaning of words while his circumstances changed so much over time that he has had to continually redefine his own philosophies: he once rejected the notion of being an exile (home was Paris he claimed), while expressing a longing for South Africa and a desire to return as a “South African” poet.<sup>109</sup> Yet in 1996, looking back at the role of poetry during the apartheid years, Breyten Breytenbach saw poetry as being resistance, the very heart of the craft of writing poetry, its only *raison d’être*.

Fear can stalk the exile: in the early poetry written after he was refused entry into South Africa and published in *in Africa even the flies are happy* [sic],<sup>110</sup> images of fear, loss and death are vented with an angry lyricism. This was the poetry that took the Afrikaner world by storm

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<sup>108</sup> Breytenbach, *In Africa Even the Flies Are Happy: Selected Poems 1964-1977*, 100.

<sup>109</sup> Breyten Breytenbach, *The Memory of Birds in Times of Revolution* (London: Faber, 1996), 15.

<sup>110</sup> Breytenbach, *In Africa Even the Flies Are Happy: Selected Poems 1964-1977*. Further citations of this work are given in the text.

and which earned Breytenbach major Afrikaans poetry prizes (1964 and again in 1967 and 1970) even though he was not a resident of South Africa. An infant terrible, he remained abroad while in South Africa he was feted as the Afrikaner's true poet and writer who swept the Afrikaans language into the modern era and literary modernism.

Reminders of the everyday are mixed with metaphors: "its raining the streets flayed and slippery" [sic], "the green trees are monks, muttering" ("Threat of the sick," 3) in which he ambiguously claims a "black tongue." Is he ill or merely-ill-advised to do so? Has he become a little mad because of this? Or is he bent on the path of self-destruction he had already identified within himself? He is in exile like the Arabs also resident in Paris, "I also / like stroking an Africa of green / clay in the chart of my brain" (5).

His poem "breyten [sic] prays for himself" is a remarkably prescient anticipation of fear as Breytenbach mulls on the horror of capture and political involvement (countering a poem courting pain by the Afrikaans poet N. van Wyk Louw):

but keep Pain far from Me o Lord  
That others may bear it  
Be taken into custody, Shattered  
    Stoned  
    Hanged  
    Lashed  
    Used  
    Tortured  
    Crucified  
    Interrogated  
    Placed under house arrest  
    Made to slave their guts out  
  
Banished to obscure islands till the end of their days  
.....  
But not ME  
Never give us Pain or complain  
    ("breyten [sic] prays for himself," 6)

This painful dirge encapsulates many of the horrors experienced by imprisoned writers in South Africa and Breytenbach himself was to spend two of his seven years of imprisonment in solitary confinement. Breytenbach rejects the experience of pain as having a purpose, seeing it as futile, a reality he was forced to face during his years of imprisonment. In this poem he turns identification around so that he is both the torturer and the tortured: he seems to say under torture I will not complain, I will suffer in silence, have no voice, but I will also not experience this agony, others are bearing this for me, am I then the torturer who does not feel anything for the pain I inflict.... It is not surprising that Lawrence Weschler has included Breytenbach's story in

his book *Calamities of exile*,<sup>111</sup> as the exilic experience was both defining and degenerative for Breytenbach. Indeed the amount of critical writing about and interviews with Breytenbach create the legend, the story, or so it becomes, of the writer as his own subject and the subject of so much writing. We are captured ourselves by the drama and the inventiveness, the power and the rhetoric, the force of the story and the strength of the personality. (For an account of the circumstances surrounding Breytenbach's arrest trail and detention, I refer readers to Breytenbach,<sup>112</sup> Weschler and Brink.<sup>113</sup>)

It is easy to forget (Celan and Lévinas would remind us) that the stories of exile are not a story: the state of being in exile or an exile belongs to a person; the real is not an other anymore than a poem is. So not only does the poem revoke the exile, the poem revokes the subject as other. Behind the language, the poetry, the political activism of Brutus, Breytenbach, Mphahlele, Kunene, the ANC and worker poets, there is not only an intensity and a longing but also a commitment to work for political change, a deep belief and a hope for something different. It is the altruism of this thrust that finds representations of bravery in the poetry. In Breytenbach's early writing we sense pessimism, scepticism and cynicism, an anger and disillusionment. Yet in spite of this, Breytenbach's thoughts and emotions evolve openly and courageously in his prolific writing so that the transitions are made visible to us.

In a speech entitled "On the ethics of resistance as a writer in a totalitarian state,"<sup>114</sup> Breytenbach pleads for an end to public indifference, a stance he has maintained throughout his public life and writing. His consciousness of the challenges of finding or creating meaning in multilingual conflicts and contexts carries through in his playful disregard of linguistic conventions, in his tributes to Rimbaud and Baudelaire as well as his awareness of creating and disrupting the Afrikaans lexicon. Through all his challenges to himself and his readers and critics, Breytenbach has maintained his belief that "writing is politics"<sup>115</sup>:

To keep up the noise level. To create confusion at least. To be an underminer campaigning for *alternatives*; that is, for *thinking* (even if it has to be through word thinking), that is, against the laming of the palate."<sup>116</sup> ...Above all, it means to project the *feel* of feeling. . . That is, to my mind what revolution, which is resistance, is about. In terms of writing.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Lawrence Weschler, *Calamities of Exile: three nonfiction novellas*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

<sup>112</sup> Breyten Breytenbach, *Memory of Snow and of Dust* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989); ———, *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984).

<sup>113</sup> André Brink, *A Fork in the Road: A Memoir* (London: Vintage Books, 2009).

<sup>114</sup> Breyten Breytenbach, *End Papers* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1986), 184-194.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

Percy Shelley wrote to Leigh Hunt in 1820: “The system of society as it exists at present must be overthrown from the foundations.”<sup>118</sup> In his Preface to *The Revolt of Islam*, Shelley presumes that it is the challenge and awakening of emotions which will lead his readers to reject oppression and injustice. It seems to me that Nkosi was advocating a similar sentiment when he rejected Sartre’s renunciation of literature and Senghor’s decision to legislate as a legislator and not as a poet where the inner self of the writer is revealed to the reader. Breytenbach’s poetry speaks to us from multiple selves exploring the various possible identities an exile, a writer, a poet, a policeman and others could assume in the context of South Africa under apartheid. Yet once apartheid has ended, Breytenbach inhabits what he calls the “middle world,” a place where Nkosi’s “inner geography”<sup>119</sup> has become the travail of “finding sound shared morals.”<sup>120</sup>

In all Breytenbach’s writing (as with Percy Bysshe Shelley), a real person not a scripted one emerges: in the early poems as troubled, questioning and hurt, “We chat old corpses in Sunday best,”<sup>121</sup> an evocative image of church-goers on a Sunday dressed for the solemnity of the ritual, talking about the past much as a group of exiles would do. Breytenbach had become involved with South African exiles in Paris, many of whom worked for the ANC and other radical organizations. Even so he continued to be feted by Afrikaners, including leading government ministers, for his poetry. He became the prodigal son who must return home a hero, a tension obvious in his writing. Remembering South Africa he wrote: “I don’t trust in its future.../....each day I remember less of its language,” (“Like Slaked Lime,” 20). Here he was addressing not the exile community but the Afrikaner community in which he grew up and the language in which he wrote: “the heart has lost its peels and pride” (20). The colloquial South African phrase “Hell-and-Gone” to mean a remote and isolated place became, for Breytenbach, South Africa: he appealed to the “Traveller from Hell-and-Gone” to “Tell me of my people” (“(from) *Ars Poetica*,” 23). South Africa had become a distant place and we can construe the irony of the multiple dimensions of this representation. Most of his poetry reflects not only a sense of having to escape the politics he resists but also a strong desire to return to his family and the landscape of his childhood: “how’s it going at the other end of the world?” in “Morning Song,” (29). He writes to his mother “ma / I’ve been thinking / if I even come home” (“The Hand Full of Feathers,” 30) always with a sense of the rural landscape of his upbringing.

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<sup>118</sup> Aveling, Aveling, and Shelley, *Shelley’s Socialism and Popular Songs Wholly Political, and Destined to Awaken and Direct the Imagination of the Reformers*, 15.

<sup>119</sup> Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 106.

<sup>120</sup> Breyten Breytenbach, *Notes from the Middle World* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009), 17.

<sup>121</sup> Breytenbach, *In Africa Even the Flies Are Happy: Selected Poems 1964-1977*, 19. Further citations of this work are given in the text.

Breytenbach plays with language as an existential tool, a medium of consciousness where “the word decides the thought” (23). Thoughts on poetry and exile or internationalism or globalism pervade his work: “my poems go no further than a day-trip / and I’m a globe-trotter” (the wandering afrikaner [sic], 24). His lyrical voice pervades his love poetry which is not an answer to duress or suffering but rather a bitter-sweet release, “to be full of needles full of yearning” (“The Open Sky (with torelli inside),” 22).

However, even his importance as an Afrikaner literary icon and his two brothers’ involvement with the South African army and police, could not keep Breytenbach out of prison: he became a showcase and a warning to others. This ambivalence was to continue during his imprisonment when a prison Colonel frequently took Breytenbach out of his cell so that Breytenbach could entertain him and relatives with readings of his poetry: “gentlemen I stand at your disposal stripped / for the highest bidder,” (20) and so it must have felt to him. Possibly used or duped or obligated by a sense of rebellion against his upbringing into a mad-cap return to South Africa to recruit two activists for a military white wing of the ANC, pretending to be Italian, Breytenbach was arrested and tried under South Africa’s notorious Terrorism Act.

In prison Breytenbach continued to write poetry without the restrictions on writing many black activists faced. The South African regime promoted an idea of Breytenbach as a great Afrikaans writer and a naïve political novice:

You will learn to be submissive  
submissive and humble.  
And you will learn to use the Taal, (language)  
With humility you will use it  
For it is we who possess the mouths  
With the poison in the throb and the flow of the heart  
 (“The Struggle for the Taal,” 93)

This “grammar of violence” (95) was also Celan’s inheritance, Celan using poetic language to redefine otherness. Breytenbach constantly subverts his own words in an attempt to jolt Afrikaans-speaking South Africans out of complacency. The other is also in the poem, in the nether land between the known and the empathetic imaginary. In prison, confronted by the cruelty of apartheid, there is an endless winter, snow, greyness, whiteness, ash, cadavers, guts, ice: “O how did this happen?” (“Freezing Point,” 97). In Celan the purity of snow and its equation with mother’s milk is destroyed by blood which Celan describes as blackness. Breytenbach finds himself at “a border-post” (“Winter I,” 98), a crossing, a barrier, a point of interrogation, an outcast in exile, an exile. In 2004, Breytenbach’s poem “after Celan” was published in a special issue of *New German Critique* dedicated to Celan. Here the images of snow and a border recur:



Carrying my share of snow  
I crossed the border into darkness and found people there. They all  
called me “brother”<sup>122</sup>

The idea of comradeship is inherent in both Celan and Breytenbach as it is with most of the South African exilic poets. In the intensity of the personal experience of exile, there is also the community of resistance. Lest we then become seduced by the melody of the poem, Breytenbach invokes Celan:

there is another world –  
it is this  
Whorish overtime. And eternity  
babelled around the edges, bloodblack<sup>123</sup>

We are confounded by white and black where the grammar of violence creates ambiguous meanings which are not those explicitly determined by apartheid: in prison there “are guards with black tongues”(98), though we do not know if these are white or black guards or if black is used punitively. We do not know if the “other world” is utopian or possible, if it is surrounded by language, babel or babble. The homage to Celan is clear. Celan’s famous poem “Todesfuge” (Deathfuge) repeats, also an echo across time, “Black milk of daybreak”<sup>124</sup> which brings death, as do Breytenbach’s “Christ’s executioners” (“The Struggle for the Taal,” 93). It is through the use of Afrikaans that Breytenbach identifies with the executioners yet clearly he was on the outside of Afrikaner political culture, inside prison.

Several collections of Breytenbach’s poetry were published whilst he was in prison, being compilations of poems taken from collections published previously, expressions of support and solidarity often compiled by friends and writers (for example the collection *and death white as words*<sup>125</sup> published in 1978). A collaborative show of support continued throughout Breytenbach’s imprisonment in spite of the bannings of these collections or poems within South Africa. From this collection, his poem to the Prime Minister B. J. Vorster entitled “Letter to butcher [sic] from abroad” (85) was thought to have clinched the length of his sentence, originally nine years imprisonment. The brutal accusation “*and you, butcher [sic]*” is reminiscent of “j’accuse”:

I’m standing on bricks before my neighbours  
I am statue of liberty and liberation  
Trying to scream light in the dusk

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<sup>122</sup> Breyten Breytenbach, “After Celan,” *New German Critique*, no. 91 (2004), 15.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Paul Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 31.

<sup>125</sup> Breyten Breytenbach, Selected, edited and introduced by A.J. Coetzee, *And Death White as Words*, trans. André P. Brink, et al. (London: Rex Collings 1978).

With electrodes tied to my testicles  
I'm writing slogans in my crimson urine  
("Letter to butcher from abroad," 87)

These images build to a crescendo of questions asking 'the butcher' if he feels culpable, if he can acknowledge his guilt. This poem sounds the bell, the chime, the death march of the prisoners on death row as it does through the words of Pheto, Cronin, Brutus and others who experienced or witnessed or heard the horror of torture. The words speak directly to us in the form of questions which Breytenbach has continued to pose about political issues.

In 2002 Breytenbach wrote a letter<sup>126</sup> to the Israeli then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon about the plight of Palestinians in Gaza. Most South African exilic poets continued their activism into the twenty-first century. Recent interviews with Kgositsile, Brutus (who passed away on December 26<sup>th</sup>, 2009), Breytenbach and others confirm the political courage of their youth as they continue an ongoing commitment to politics and poetry. Breytenbach's latest book of poetry, *Voiceover*, is a tribute to the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish who died in 2008. In a recent interview<sup>127</sup> tribute to Darwish, Breytenbach answered this question put to him by Chris Casali: "Writing truly helped you survive?"

If you couldn't write the way he did, I'm sure he would have gone mad. It's a very contradictory thing you know – writing is not changing the world, yet, we...carry forward a little bit, some of the importance of the struggle that one is involved in. If you can't do that to writing, then you would probably have to, just have to disappear.

Breytenbach has carried forward his own acts of consciousness through his writings and speeches which speak directly to us about the state of exile in all its romantic and postmodern permutations. In the poem "In exile from exile"<sup>128</sup> he puns on the notion of exile from the "Holy Land," a theme he returns to in his wonderful autobiographical account of three months in South Africa, *A Season in Paradise*.<sup>129</sup> In both he plays with the early Afrikaners' dream of South Africa as a holy land, a paradise for an emerging volk, a country he clearly loves and longs for as "imagination's reminder."<sup>130</sup>

In several poems he paints a picture of exile as a "sluggish" passage, "the body's passageways too steam full" ("In exile from exile," 49), an "eavesdropper" ("Eavesdropper," 51) "one of many, / the maladjusted. / the hosts of expatriates, deserters, / citizens of the guts of darkness" (51). Written in Paris in the Easter of 1968, "Eavesdropper" is a tribute to those in

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<sup>126</sup> Breyten Breytenbach, "An Open Letter to General Ariel Sharon," accessed October 8, 2008, <http://www.thenation.com/article/open-letter-general-ariel-sharon>.

<sup>127</sup> Clovis Casali, "Interview with Breyten Breytenbach," (France24, December 22, 2002)

<sup>128</sup> Breytenbach, *And Death White as Words*, 48.

<sup>129</sup> ———, *A Season in Paradise*.

<sup>130</sup> ———, *And Death White as Words*, 49. Further citations of this work are given in the text.

exile. With Breytenbach's Zen detachment ever-present he deconstructs an idea of an exile: "I now also know the rooms of loneliness. . . I too like a beggar / pray for the alms of 'news from home.'" He presents a disillusioned group haunted by the portent of death which stalked many activists and poets, "of early-ageing revolutionaries, / of poets without language and blind painters" and asks "must I too give a deeper meaning? / that all of us are only exiles from Death." He answers the question of "you ask me how it is living in exile, friend" with a plea to us "in the name of what you want to know / be good to those who come after us."

Breytenbach pays tribute to Mikis Theodorakis in a poem which evokes the memory of Rimbaud in Africa ("Whale in the Mountain," 63) All three exiles search "through shutters of your quarantine," another metaphor for the enforced separation from home. We do not know why the exiles are quarantined: for whose good, or away from whom or what? Protected or removed for what purpose? These are questions whose answers are more often than not quite arbitrary. In the poem "Exile, representative" (80) the exile is subsumed by fat, death and decay: "you live as if you can never die / because your life is not here" (81). The exile is depicted as not alive, a shadow with no substance, defined by absence and death. Here the exile becomes a spokesperson for causes, for the "Officials of the World's Conscience," so that words and language become "parasites on your tongue," speaking the language of others. Breytenbach mourns the loss of self or of language that loses conviction – a preoccupation also of Shelley, that poetry should be able to "transmute all that it touches"<sup>131</sup> and Celan: "It, the language, remained, not lost, yes, yet in spite of everything."<sup>132</sup> After its long journey through nothingness it is language that escapes exile, that returns as a constant rebirth of ideas:

. . . by means of the narrow and exclusive language of poetry...I want to try to say things which will affect as many people as possible.<sup>133</sup>

broadly speaking writing starts for me with resistance. . .<sup>134</sup>

Like Celan, Breytenbach evokes angels, whether of mercy or death, or the self or oppressor as angel. Breytenbach remembers the railway (that symbol of the Holocaust horror), for him not an image of the migrant labourer going back and forth from "the hinterlands of southern and central Africa," to the "belly of the earth" of South Africa, Masekela's coal train *Stimela*,<sup>135</sup> but rather of a journey to the heart of the platteland (literally...., figuratively...). The

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<sup>131</sup> Shelley, *The Major Works Including Poetry, Prose and Drama*, 698.

<sup>132</sup> Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, 395.

<sup>133</sup> Breytenbach, *A Season in Paradise*, 165.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>135</sup> Masekela, Hugh. "Stimela." In *Musicians in Exile*, directed by Holender, Jacques. 75 min. Canada: Nemesis Productions/Rhapsody Films/Casa de Musica, 1990.

angel at the platform “hears / the engine tolling – no pasaran no pasaran<sup>136</sup>... rocks rocky rocks rocky...the angel has lost all memory, alone / he loses being denied whatever he has done – / all gone all gone – .”<sup>137</sup> The poet becomes the angel. This painful evocation of exile cries with loss and protest while the use of the words “*no pasaran*” (They will not pass) is a reference to the Spanish Civil War. In the South African climate of repression “no pasaran” might metaphorically have branded any writer a communist or a terrorist under the apartheid governments. Even though these labels were used against Breytenbach by the State, many groups such as the police, journalists and even some of Breytenbach’s literary supporters still tried to separate his political views from his writing.

The exilic trope extends through much of Breytenbach’s writing as language which resists itself in order to become an open-ended possibility of engagement with self and society. This poetics of altruism was also Celan’s: pleading to the reader to be generous towards the open heart of the writer, the exposed sores embedded in language, the rawness of self exposed and bleeding, the exile pursuing the ordinary strangeness of everyday life in a quest for Celan’s conversation that does not yet exist, with an unknown reader. The poem became, for Celan, “A kind of homecoming,”<sup>138</sup> a “meridian.”<sup>139</sup> For the exile, the meridian can be read as a trope for poetry: a journey travelling across circular globes of experience in different times and place from the inner-heart to the reader. In her book on Breytenbach, Sienart refers to this confrontation as “a form of identity that promotes awareness of the world, and ourselves, as revolutionary centres of renewal and change.”<sup>140</sup>

Towards the end of the autobiographical work *Return to Paradise*<sup>141</sup> Breytenbach compare exiles to birds. Images of flight develop into ruminations on the exile’s relationship to nature and survival until the chatty prose becomes increasingly poetic as if the form itself, having lived too long on “iron rations,” escapes. The exile (Breytenbach) sings his bird-song at the end of his long book by stating, “this is the beginning of a poem.”<sup>142</sup>

Poetry was/is a necessity for Breytenbach, especially so during his seven years in Pretoria Maximum Security jail and Pollsmoor Prison in Cape Town. As he was allowed

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<sup>136</sup> Breytenbach, *And Death White as Words*, 99.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>138</sup> Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, 412.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 413.

<sup>140</sup> Marilet Sienart, *The I of the Beholder: Identity Formation in the Art and Writing of Breyten Breytenbach* (Cape Town: Kwela Books and SA History Online, 2001), 10.

<sup>141</sup> Breyten Breytenbach, *Return to Paradise* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993).

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

(encouraged) to write in prison, the result was at least four hundred poems<sup>143</sup> published at various stages after his release. All of these were written in Afrikaans and have been published in several separate volumes as well as under the title *Die Ongedanse dans* (The Undanced Dance). Many of these poems have appeared in translation. In the collection *Windcatcher*, prison and nature are both “putrid,”<sup>144</sup> grass is “meagre,” Breytenbach becomes a “sun-moth,” with “no destination” against the “ant fortresses” and “jackals” (“Destination,” 63). Birds are symbols of freedom echoing the sounds of the jailers’ keys (“December,” 66). As Breytenbach becomes more and more detached from both the political and physical reality of South Africa, the jail resembles a “monastery,” a “haven for night-birds” (“Poem on Toilet Paper,” 73-75). Only poetry, the “writing-book” is a “flower to the silence” (74). He hears the songs of prisoners on death-row whose chants are like “the breast / of the bird steeped in honey” (“For the Singers,” 83). Here the bird is a hopeless creature weighed down in a sweetness of song which transmogrifies into a death sentence, the stickiness and glue of honey being ultimately too much for flight.

Poetry becomes his home in prison, his friend and companion; it is his solace, his sensual and intellectual stimulation, allowing him one freedom, to experiment with form, language, ideas and expression, to emulate a bird. Poetry revokes absences, negatives, multiple identities, exile. The self is dissolved. After prison, physical exile from the country is easier, even desirable; there is no home anymore but the “refined knack of make-believe life.”<sup>145</sup>

We can contrast Breytenbach’s initial depressed and bitter thoughts of home:

‘Home’? How long now have I been dragging my ‘home’ around with me? How thick the crust on my back, the tortoise shell - the callous nail [sic]? It will be thirteen years, give or take a few weeks. But what will I find there? What late lamented “I” will I encounter there? This distance, this anticipation, the long winter are now the only things familiar, my home. And that which is there has become a subconscious, a wound which has healed, a memory, a past and a future, a blueprint of a dream, Paradise. *O beloved inknown, Oa strange beloved* [sic].....<sup>146</sup>

with Breytenbach’s 2002 interview with Casali<sup>147</sup> in which he seems to have accepted his own global identity: writing / representation defines the very substance of his being.

The importance and yet at the same time the depth, that stretches across centuries, of the act of writing which is the act of consciousness being carried forward...knowing which side you belong. Poetry for me comes from the people...poetry comes very profoundly from those everyday experiences.

<sup>143</sup> Helize van Vuuren, “‘Labryinth of Loneliness’: Breyten Breytenbach's Prison Poetry (1976-1985),” *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 46, no. 2 (2009).

<sup>144</sup> Breyten Breytenbach, *Windcatcher: New and Selected Poems 1964-2006* (Harcourt Books, 2007), Further citations of this work are given in the text.

<sup>145</sup> Breytenbach, *Return to Paradise*, 222.

<sup>146</sup> ———, *A Season in Paradise* 37.

<sup>147</sup> Casali, “Interview with Breyten Breytenbach,” n.p.

I return to Shelley whose preface to *The Revolt of Islam* carries that same sentiment “across centuries.” Shelley hoped to kindle “within the bosoms of my readers a virtuous enthusiasm for those doctrines of liberty and justice, that faith and hope in something good,”<sup>148</sup> and believed that poetry had the capacity to stir the consciousness and conscience of readers to resist oppression. In the Preface Shelley communicates directly to us, the reader, resisting the impulse to acknowledge any power in poetry which has not provoked a response within his reader.

For Breytenbach as well as Celan, the poem or language becomes the home that carries an *act* of consciousness to us. I have shown how Dennis Brutus, like Shelley, used the act of writing as a means of resistance. Breytenbach’s submerged identities clearly find substance and meaning in expressive writing only as long as the reader enters into the otherness of this experience, itself a suspension of the known certainties of the everyday.

and behind the glass three grimacing  
security police are waving  
clods in hands  
goodbye

I shall take off in this blackened aircraft  
Provisionally free  
And deprived finally of all genealogy and memory and security  
In search of the frontiers of the night<sup>149</sup>

These lines embody the contradictions of exile: being allowed to leave the country under the watchful gaze of “three grimacing / security police” who nevertheless wave: how do clods wave, being coagulated and heavy and hard like clods of earth, or clodded brains, dolts, robotically waving like country bumpkins? They wave “goodbye”: a final, threatening statement which promises no return. The aircraft is dark, ambiguously blackened, freedom an illusion; the self has been stripped, deprived, denuded of those very symbols that create and give meaning to Breytenbach’s poetry, “genealogy and memory and security.” Another darkness awaits and the exile is poised to search the frontier, again a nomad at the borders of uncertainty.

In this section I have shown how the political reality of apartheid South Africa is represented in Breytenbach’s writing as exile *transformed* into poetry, as a natural personal and spiritual home for Breytenbach. These representations of South Africa inform Breytenbach’s identity and hence negate the exilic trope by clearly grounding Breytenbach in writing and artistic expression. Intensely personal, Breytenbach’s poetry diffuses public appropriation by inviting us to enter into his personal, literary and political struggles. I have called this aspect of

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<sup>148</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Narrative Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley Arranged in Chronological Order with an Introduction by C.H. Herford* (London: Chatto and Windus, c.1927), 115.

<sup>149</sup> Breytenbach, *A Season in Paradise*, 268.

exilic poetry the altruistic gaze for the poet/poetry itself is looking at/speaking to us, waiting for us to give meaning, in Breytenbach's case, to the validity of writing South Africa as home.

### **Mazisi Kunene: keeper of the people's symbols**

In South Africa, exilic poetry has been characterized by an engagement with social and ethical issues as these affected circles of community and power relationships through and dependent on particular historical circumstances. I have argued that this poetry tends to address an audience with the expectation that content will have meaning and resonance. In apartheid South Africa, the structures of confinement and exile (such as prison and the bureaucratic apparatus of apartheid) gave rise to resistance in the form of an extended appeal to an audience. Thus a direct gaze or engagement instead of silence (compliance) is the poet's challenge to us the reader or audience. We are asked to understand that the altruism and courage inherent in the poet's exposure of a relationship to his/her South Africa in language and emotion is a means of revoking exile, of writing exile into the no more, of writing rights.

According to Ojaide, this concern with social relationships and political justice is one of the defining characteristics of African literature and one which I have privileged by the theoretical positioning of this thesis. I have argued that this stance leads to a human rights discourse: "The poet is like the antenna of his/her people's consciousness."<sup>150</sup> A concern for historical and communal ties can be read clearly in the poetry of Mazisi (Raymond) Kunene as well as in his conviction that the role of the poet is to reflect these relationships. In this way we are locating a theoretical stance inside South African exilic poetry which finds a root in multiple histories. Mazisi Kunene, like Breytenbach (though for very different reasons!) saw language as a means of soldering a South African identity. He wrote in isiZulu and translated his poetry into English, becoming South Africa's first poet laureate in 2005, a year before his death. Zulu is the most commonly spoken language of South Africa's eleven main language groups, but it is the English translations of Kunene's poems which would have reached his first audience, readers outside South Africa. The high level of illiteracy in South Africa is a problem for all poets in and outside South Africa. Writing in English ensures a very small elite audience. Writing in one of South Africa's other eleven official languages (with the exception of English) meant an even smaller reading audience though potentially a larger listening one. The tragedy for Kunene is that

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<sup>150</sup> Tanure Ojaide, *Poetic Imagination in Black Africa. Essays on African Poetry*. (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 1996), 30.

his writing remained distant from the audience he sought, but available to all those students who studied with him at the University of California.

Ari Sitas presents an interesting perspective on the rhetoric of interpretation of Zulu-ness in contemporary South Africa and points to the result of the populism fostered by the ANC which still finds a voice at rallies or meetings when poverty or development issues are discussed. Sitas characterizes this rhetoric as “a symbolic assertion of exclusion and hope,”<sup>151</sup> a throw-back to the rallies of the 1970s and a sign that issues of rights are still active for South Africans. Rights are expressed in terms of improvements to living conditions, eradication of poverty and unemployment, all of which find expression in South Africa’s Bill of Rights and were part of a discourse of rights encouraged by the ANC. Sitas sees a danger in the portrayal of South Africa’s current president Jacob Zuma in ethnic terms and would rather discussions of Zulu-ness revolved around representations and constructions of Zulu history. In the introduction to *Emperor Shaka the Great* Kunene thanks “my brother and leader, Prince Gatsha Buthelezi who greatly inspired and encouraged me.”<sup>152</sup> Buthelezi gave an address at Kunene’s funeral in 2006. Kunene saw Buthelezi as a direct link with the Shaka lineage as indeed he was through his uncle, the son of the exiled Dinuzulu. We know that Buthelezi has been a maverick in South African politics who was not in favour of national unity, but for maintaining a separate Zulu region, a controversial stance. It is the representation of this ideology in 2009 that worries Sitas. What Buthelezi and Kunene shared was the privileging of Zulu history as a direct link between the past and the present.

Kunene was banned under the Suppression of Communism Act, 1966. The Act names the banned people, many predominantly writers. Kunene’s entry reads: “Kunene, Raymond Fakaza, *alias* Mazizi James Desiree, Journalist, Country residing in: England.”<sup>153</sup> Of the 46 people on this list, all were in exile. Being on this list meant that Kunene’s *Anthem of the Decade* and *Zulu Poems* were banned and could not be distributed within South Africa.

As we continue to see, exile has been hewn into South African history. Shaka, king of the Zulus in the very early eighteenth-century, was initially exiled from his father and home at birth. He went on to become a mythical and contested figure in South African history whose legacy has been the subject of a vast amount of interpretation, and representations which have

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<sup>151</sup> Ari Sitas, “Populism and the National Democratic Revolution in South Africa,” accessed June 1, 2010, <http://concernedafricascholars.org/populism-and-the-national-democratic-revolution-in-south-africa/>.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>153</sup> Union of South Africa. *Notice in Terms of Section Ten Quin of the Suppression of Communism Act, 1950 (Act No 44 of 1950), as Amended*, 24.



ranged from poems to films and a TV series. Shaka Zulu is also the subject of Mazisi Kunene's epic poem *Emperor Shaka the Great* as well as Oswald Mtsahli's poem "The birth of Shaka." Shaka appears as a subject in South African literature from very early in the twentieth-century when poems such as "Tshaka's Death"<sup>154</sup> glorified the Zulu chief and ensured that he would remain a heroic black symbol for other poets. The author of this poem, the headmaster of Dube's Ohlange School Robert Grendon, consciously set out to make a national hero of Shaka. The language of the poem is full of arcane English idioms and doom-laden words and is an altogether different poem from Kunene's poetic epic verse. The need to identify heroes of the past continues to be very much a part of the rewriting of South Africa's history. Shaka was the protagonist of a much criticised South African TV series shown several times in South Africa and the United States. According to Tomaselli (quoting figures from Measham): "By 1992, it had been seen by over 350 million viewers"<sup>155</sup> in the United States. Kunene rejected the series in disgust: "The series is rotten. It should not have been shown again, as it was mainly based on lies and was a propaganda tool aimed at projecting the Zulu people and their king as bloodthirsty savages and whites as their saviours."<sup>156</sup>

Kunene dedicated *Emperor Shaka the Great* to "all the heroes and heroines of the African children and all her children who shall make her great."<sup>157</sup> Published by Heinemann, the book appeared in Kunene's English translation before the Zulu version was published. I can find versions of this poem in Japanese but cannot find reference to a published Zulu version. UNESCO identified Kunene's work as important in the presentation of Zulu history (accepting the poem into its Historical Collection) and supported Kunene's translation which he amended to suit an English-speaking audience. Kunene felt that certain parts of the poem would need a verbal rendition to capture the import of the content. The poem is "an attempt to provide an honest view of the achievements of Shaka" (xiii). Derek Walcott's epic poem *Omeros* moved his hero on a journey to Africa and beyond. It is tantalising to speculate on a meeting between Kunene and Walcott (both were born in the same year) as the latter's poetic intent was at times similar to Kunene's.

Kunene's intended audience is the broad South African public, his family, particularly his father and the "African martyrs from Algeria to South Africa," (xii) but his actual audience

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<sup>154</sup> Robert Grendon, "Tshaka's Death," in *The Return of the Amasi Bird*, eds. Tim Couzens and Essop Patel (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982), 19-26.

<sup>155</sup> Keyan G Tomaselli, "Shaka Zulu and Visual Constructions of History," accessed January 13, 2010, <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/firstrelease/fr0703/ktfr15.html>.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid. Quote from , in Mkhize cited by Tomaselli.

<sup>157</sup> Mazisi Kunene, *Emperor Shaka the Great: A Zulu Epic* (London: Heinemann, 1979), frontispiece. Further citations of this work are given in the text.

would have been limited to fellow exiles, academics and scholars of Zulu history and literature. In his introduction, Kunene clearly valorises Shaka as a military and political hero who believed that “the state must guarantee equality to all its citizens,” (xxiii) thus supporting the idea of national unity in the figure of Shaka. Objections to this valorisation need to be taken into account as Kunene saw himself as correcting an image of Shaka constructed largely by white history and white writers, an image subsequently ignored by the script-writers of the TV series *Shaka Zulu*. Bill Faure, the producer, had read Kunene’s epic but the South African Broadcasting Commission was not prepared to support a TV series based on work by a member of the ANC<sup>158</sup> and instead presented representations of Shaka as seen through imperialist British eyes. Hamilton argues cogently that the series can also be read as providing support for Buthelezi’s view of Zulu history and its place in South Africa.

*Emperor Shaka* consists of seventeen books, each with several “poems of excellence” which “project an ethical system beyond the circumstances of the individual” (xxix). Kunene is careful to explain that his poem is not simply intended to create a hero but is rather a record of history and of social practice and the role of poetry in creating that practice. Poetry, action and interpretation are always close to Kunene’s heart and we hear through him the voices of poets interpreting Shaka in his time: “yes, even the poet says of these days: ‘They gossiped about you, my lord’” (38). With so many representations generated by Shaka, with large receptive audiences willing to appropriate Shaka for their own ends, we can but look at the poem in our framework of exilic poetry together with Kunene’s view of the role of poetry in upholding a national history.

Book Three of *Emperor Shaka* is entitled “The worst time of exile” which with Book 4 covers the period when Shaka was adrift from his land. In the introduction Kunene presents Dingiswayo, a king who provided a refuge and asylum for people outside his immediate family. Kunene considers Dingiswayo a humane and just person who understood communal ties over and above the loyalty to clan. He provides a home for Shaka and nurtures him to become a future leader.

The narrative of the poem is almost prose-like as if the poet is telling a tale. The images in Sections 3 and 4 could represent many different periods of South African history: “The neighbouring hills echoed: ‘bandits are killing our children!’ / The fighting clubs crunched the fragile skulls” (37). The words of exile echo from Shaka to Kunene: “There are still other lands that are open to us” (38). Kunene gives voice to Shaka’s mother Nandi, presenting her as a person of strength and independence as she journeys away from her home and from a violent

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<sup>158</sup> C.A. Hamilton, “A Positional Gambit: Shaka Zulu and the Conflict in South Africa,” *Radical History Review* 39, Spring (1989).

husband: “She spoke defiantly, despite the terrors she knew lay ahead of her” (38). Kunene’s poetic, lyrical voice weaves like a shadow through his tale as the moon “gave us tales of fantasy, visiting us with dreams” (38). These are dreams of invention and hope but are tempered by the poet as an historical conduit through which to tell his tale. Kunene uses the journey into exile to valorize the perceptiveness of Shaka and Nandi. Each moment of adversity meets a measured and considered response despite the “sharp screams” which “throttle the night” (42). The world of the Ancestors is always present and the king and the poet too “is not for one man but for all generations. / He must learn his lesson from others. / He is the keeper who preserves the people’s symbols” (43). This is Kunene the teacher-poet explaining to the next generation that we cannot escape the symbols of our past, that words too are handed down for a purpose, to be sent off into an unknown future. Courage too comes from the past and from love: “For those who are loved never fail” (44).

Kunene’s symbols anchor Kunene both to the literature of his past (Dhlomo and Vilikazi) as well as to the role of the poet in Zulu society. He presents a joyful picture of the role of poetry in Zulu society, where poetry is ever-present, as ritual, commentary, participant and teacher, the poet a dreamer whose poetry was “exploited for the social purpose of mobilizing the nation. The poet and the singer became central figures in Zulu society. They defined social values, celebrating what was historically significant and acting as democratic agents to reaffirm the approval or disapproval of the whole nation (xxv-xxvi).” In exile, Kunene adopts all these roles as an anchor to the past and to appeal to current South Africans, a hopeful and altruistic gesture towards future generations who might seek out their history. In *Emperor Shaka* the poet’s role is not simply one of valorisation: the poet as dreamer interprets the present in terms of the past, linking imagination with reality. “Our forefathers sat telling tales of their past / They debated and argued over many mysteries of life” (189). The poet as conduit of the past must take on this role and in this way Kunene presaged a unity between the anti-apartheid movement and the imaginative tales of history. The story of Shaka was important for Kunene as a link between imagined representations over time. “For many years there were rumours of the arrival of the Pumpkin Race.” It is the teller of tales who tells the story of “nations emerging from the ocean” who “resemble us but in appearance are the colour of pumpkin-porridge” (206). This image of the white colonists was confirmed for Shaka’s Assembly by “their own story-tellers who had told them as much” (207); however, the authoritative work of Kunene clarifies the tales which then receive their authenticity in the retelling as if carried to us from the Ancestors. In exile Kunene is linked to a past going back to Shaka. He creates a Shaka of reason who recognises the descriptions of whites as “strangers,” “creatures,” who “possess insatiable appetites,” “hungry

vultures,” behaving like “wild animals,” “rude in manner”, “without any graces or refinement,” “they kill and loot,” “seize children,” are “bad bugs,” “new strangers,” “their bodies always seem delicate” this “veritable race of robbers and cannibals”(207-209). Shaka’s initial response that these people are “no different from other nations of the earth” is tempered by the realisation that people have been exiled by these strangers “sent to the Island of Stones, / Known otherwise as island of Robin”(209). This timely reminder comes to us through the story of Shaka, that exile for Kunene and his compatriots was a long historical process tempered only by the company of the Ancestors. Did the Ancestors provide some comfort to Kunene as he looked out from exile at the South Africa of Sharpeville and Soweto and recreated a memory of the British colonialists? : a “violent and ruthless race, / Whoever can stand the wails of the incarcerated man, / Enjoys the spectacle of pain” (211). Kunene’s labour to represent South African history was recognised when he was made South Africa’s first poet laureate.

In 1879 the British exiled the Zulu King Cetshwayo from Natal to Cape Town after he was defeated in the Anglo-Zulu War, later sending him to London. He was reinstated in 1883 over a much smaller size of land in a divided kingdom. In this period of Zulu history, Afrikaans (Boer) renegades were supporting whichever Zulu kingdom would grant them land in the eastern half of the country. In a bid to reclaim more land, after Cetshwayo’s death Dinuzulu recruited his own mercenary supporters led by Louis Botha, who succeeded in defeating Zibhebhu, head of one of the former kingdom’s thirteen parts. Dinuzulu was compelled to give Botha and his supporters land when they declared their independence from the British. The British promptly annexed Zululand and after ongoing inter-tribal conflict, Dinuzulu was exiled to St.Helena (in keeping with British tradition) where he spent ten to fifteen years in exile. He was later returned to South Africa and was arrested after being implicated in the Bhambatha rebellion. He was freed from prison by Louis Botha who went on to become the first president of the Union of South Africa in 1910.

The expanding Afrikaners had already cancelled, negated, removed and exiled the rights of black South Africans as equals in their land arrangements and both Afrikaners and the British left a legacy of division with large parts of the land made into smaller tribal entities. Apartheid governments tried to exploit these divisions in the apartheid homeland system which stripped so-called homeland residents of South African citizenship. The British lost their concept of rights in their colonies. In 2008 the early and curious alliance against the British between Botha and Dinuzulu on the issue of land rights was recognised in Durban when statues of both men were erected side-by-side as “symbols of the beginning of the journey towards reconciliation in this

country.”<sup>159</sup> The importance of land rights and the problems caused by alienation from land and people are prominent concerns within Zulu poetry and were identified as symbols of disunity in Kunene’s Emperor Shaka.

Like Brutus, Kunene started writing poetry at an early age and won a competition for “Bantu” poetry with poems written in Zulu. His status as a poet earned him accolades from, amongst others, Aimé Césaire and Ngugi wa Thiong’o for his commitment to the long tradition of Zulu poetry and the Zulu language. 1959 saw Kunene exiled from South Africa like many others after the South African government branded him a Zulu nationalist. He became a committed and high-ranking member of the ANC, serving as their chief representative in Europe where he founded the anti-apartheid movement in Britain. In 1972 Kunene was appointed director of the South African Exhibition Appeal which resulted in a major anti-apartheid art exhibition in Paris in 1983. Derrida contributed an essay to the catalogue for this exhibition, making the important point that just as world bodies started to consider the demise of world racisms, apartheid was named: “At a time when all racisms on the face of the earth were condemned, it was in the world's face that the National Party dared to campaign for the separate development of each race in the geographic zone assigned to it.”<sup>160</sup> Kunene’s contribution was recognised in a tribute to Kunene at his funeral by the then President Thabo Mbeki:

I have no hesitation in saying that this outstanding Exhibition will forever mark one of the most memorable highlights of the world struggle against apartheid, the indelible signal that the struggle for the destruction of the apartheid system was, in reality, a struggle for the elevation of the human soul.

I am certain that it was this, rather than the mere defeat of an evil regime, that persuaded the outstanding painters and sculptors - or their curators - Picasso, Marc Chagall, Giacometti, Henry Moore, Ben Enwonwu, Robert Rauschenberg and others, to contribute works to the South African (Anti-Apartheid) Exhibition Appeal, free of charge.

I will forever claim that these brilliant creative minds contributed to the South African (Anti-Apartheid) Exhibition Appeal because they felt moved to respond to the call of a kindred spirit, Mazisi Kunene, whose creativity, and therefore the ability to see beyond the world of material reality, defined who he was, as it defined the artists whose works constituted the Anti-Apartheid Exhibition.

The kindred spirit to which they had to respond was, after all, a South African, a black artist formed within the bosom of racist South Africa, our own poet and creative mind, Mazisi Kunene, to whom we owe such gems of original thought as “Zulu Poems,” “Emperor Shaka the Great,” and the later “Anthem of the Decades.”<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Runita Hanuman, “Dinuzulu Sees Light of Day,” eThekweni Municipality, accessed June 1, 2010, <http://www.durban.gov.za/durban/discover/news/dinuzulu-sees-light-of-day>. Words spoken by KwaZulu-Natal Premier Sibusiso Ndebele.

<sup>160</sup> Derrida, “Racism's Last Word,” 290.

<sup>161</sup> Thabo Mbeki, “Message from the President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, on the Death of Mazisi Raymond Kunene: August 18, 2006,” accessed November 13, 2009, [www.cas.org.za/projects/mazisikunene.doc](http://www.cas.org.za/projects/mazisikunene.doc).

Mbeki went on to acknowledge a lack of understanding among some ANC exiles of Kunene's involvement with the history of Zulu poetry. Kunene believed that the Ancestors provided spiritual nourishment to the anti-apartheid movement by giving this resistance a uniquely South African history and identity. Kunene clearly stood on the side of those African poets who felt the location of an African identity lay in an African history which could live side by side with the global identities foisted on the South African exile. The ANC, intent on maintaining its multi-racial stance, had clearly been wary of a rhetoric of difference even amongst the black community.

Nevertheless these diverse views go to the heart of the struggle for African modernity and reflect themselves in the contestations of literary representation and rights discourse in South Africa. In Mbeki's speech we see the problems of representation that are part of the ongoing literary debate in post-apartheid South Africa as the essential rewriting and assessment of its history takes place. Many articles and books have been written about South African literary directions after apartheid. In this thesis I am only examining how the trope of exile and the discourse of human rights can provide insight into the problems of South African modernity. In many ways the exiled writers prevented South African literature and the discourse of human rights from being exiled and so the literary debates within South Africa today are part of a long tradition of self-examination.

Mbeki was first of all conscious of his need to create heroes, just as the South African apartheid government appropriated Breytenbach for their political propaganda. Kunene was clearly a pivotal person in the ANC struggle, however he still pursued his passionate belief in the importance of writing South Africa history during periods of exile, disembodiment, repression and denial. He was determined not to create an absence by sublimating a large area of South Africa's literary history even as the anti-apartheid movement sought to change the future with a new cultural policy. Mbeki defined the anti-apartheid exhibition as "a struggle for the elevation of the human soul" and indeed, following Nkosi's description of apartheid as "a daily exercise in the absurd," making "it almost illegal to live,"<sup>162</sup> it becomes appropriate to ask whether Mbeki was harking back to the language of the Ancestors or of the Romantics to highlight this struggle for change. Recognition of the humanity of the majority of the population in South Africa seemed no less monumental, spiritual or sublime than the elevation of the human soul. The anti-

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<sup>162</sup> Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 35.

apartheid movement in Britain started with the aim of swaying the consciences of individuals<sup>163</sup> though after Sharpeville developed a more pragmatic approach aimed at institutions and governments. E'skia Mphahlele was also involved in the boycott movement writing resolutions for the All-African's People Conference in Ghana in 1958 to encourage economic sanctions from other African countries against South Africa. This broadening of the anti-apartheid movement was effective in rallying writers to the anti-apartheid cause as well as artists and philosophers (for example Bertrand Russell and Sartre as well as Derrida). Mbeki held to the ideal as the reason for donations of art works by figures such as Picasso and includes, though retrospectively, Kunene in this pantheon. Mbeki was also conscious that his speech, written for Kunene's family, would have a broader audience and so he publicly embraced "our own poet," thus returning Kunene from his exile into the fold, not only of the ANC, but also of South African literary history. Here were artists famous through Europe who responded to a "kindred spirit." Ojaide points to the universalising tendency within African poetry so that the concept of spiritual connection with others confirms the importance of the African imaginary.

Ntongela Masilela has called the African intellectual tradition the New African Movement, taking this name from the New Negro Movement of the early 1920s. I refer readers to Masilela's website for his scholarship in this area.<sup>164</sup> The intellectual tensions among ANC leaders reflected the diversity of views between key thinkers and writers both inside and outside South Africa and the unease with which some ANC members responded to Kunene's concern for the cosmology of African ancestors. This tension has provided fertile ground for debate in literary circles and been the subject of heated discussion at several conferences. Even now, as some African writers lament the brain drain of African intellectuals to Western universities due to lack of funding of universities in many parts of Africa, there is hope that the tension between the diasporic movement and those who remain in Africa will itself give rise to new modes of representation.<sup>165</sup> How to represent South Africa's past remains an unspoken question in Mbeki's speech. It is a tension informed by exile, by the experiences, encounters, interactions, intellectual climate, personal successes or failures that dogged writers, activists and politicians as they negotiated the immense project of bringing apartheid to an end.

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<sup>163</sup> see Christabel Gurney, "'A Great Cause': The Origins of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, June 1959-March 1960," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26, no. 1 (2000).

<sup>164</sup> Ntongela Masilela, "New African Movement," accessed January 14, 2010, <http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/NAM/>.

<sup>165</sup> Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson, *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory* (Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

The exilic experience still plays out in South Africa today. Mbeki's controversial decision not to provide drugs to fight AIDS was partially defiance against the world as well as a need to "find an African remedy" and "a fury at the West's negative perceptions of Africa."<sup>166</sup> Journalists are writing an image of the new President Jacob Zuma who was in exile like Mbeki, as a person who strongly projects his traditional Zulu heritage to South Africans. Sitas has asked whether it is responsible journalism to write, unquestioningly, a contested representation of Zulu-ness into the present. Russell believes that the effect of exile dogged Mbeki's presidency. Mbeki (like Kunene) sought an African unity. For Mbeki this manifested itself as total solidarity with other African leaders such as Mugabe, regardless of their actions.

Kunene removed himself from being an official representative of the ANC and became an academic. He was an associate professor of Literature and African Languages at the University of California, Los Angeles from 1975 to 1993, when he returned to South Africa. After his death, Kunene's wife has had to decide whether his archive should remain in South Africa or be returned to the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) where Kunene wrote most of his seminal poetry. While funds seem to be lacking to preserve Kunene's poetry within South Africa, Kunene's English epic *Emperor Shaka* can only be purchased for over one hundred US dollars. The value accorded to Kunene's poetry reflects its rare intention and the beauty of the poems. In many ways UCLA provided Kunene with a home of sorts where he was able to teach Zulu and concentrate on his poetry. Here Kunene maintained an unswerving belief in the need to incorporate elements of past Zulu poems and *iziBongo* (praise poems or poems of excellence) into his writing as a means of preserving the past for future generations. "For all creatures have their way of finding a home."<sup>167</sup>

In the Preface to *The Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain*<sup>168</sup> (poems written in isiZulu and translated by Kunene himself), Kunene appeals to the ethical side of human nature as a distinguishing marker of African history. With its emphasis on "social action and social cohesiveness"<sup>169</sup> Kunene's philosophy is similar to Soyinka who, according to Ojaide,<sup>170</sup> consciously privileged those representatives of the past whose actions within society realised these ideals. The highest tribute paid by Mbeki to Kunene in the funeral oration was honouring Kunene in death as joining the Ancestors, those real people of the past who become role models

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<sup>166</sup> Alec Russell, *After Mandela: The Battle for the Soul of South Africa* (London: Hutchinson, 2009), 217.

<sup>167</sup> Mazisi Kunene, *The Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain* (London: Heinemann, 1982), 17.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>170</sup> Ojaide, *Poetic Imagination in Black Africa: Essays on African Poetry*.



for future generations. Kunene's poetry tries to talk specifically to generations who are not interested in their history. Much African poetry tries to bridge the gap between generations encouraging the role of the poet as an educator.

Kunene argues that the complexity of community relationships define cooperation and when this historical process is disrupted, it is usually due to material or technological intrusions that we recognise as disruptive only *because* we have been exposed to examples of cooperative social structures which work due to their focus on community cooperation. South African poets in exile had to excavate their pasts in exile, but their movement through Africa and the wider world broadened their view of social conflict. Kunene was well aware of the multiple meanings accorded a concept of "paradise"<sup>171</sup> and that those who sought to define South African history used their own interpretations of the past to create or perpetuate the conflicts surrounding them. He interpreted the development of conflict as a regional insecurity which lay at the heart of material development or move to modernity, "The Fundamental Law of Humanity and Cooperation is suspended."<sup>172</sup> He was quick to point out that this moral project is common to all societies and would, I am sure, acknowledge a similar philosophy in Shelley's *Preface to Islam* in which Shelley writes that "gloom and misanthropy have become the characteristics of the age in which we live"<sup>173</sup> after the tyrannies which followed the French Revolution. Of course this Fundamental Law was being lost as Shelley wrote and the British were establishing power relationships throughout Africa. In Kunene's Preface he specifically alludes to the role of Zulu princes or kings who, he believed, brought a form of democratic communal governance to communities after war which could provide lessons for future generations.

Kunene thus started the process of acknowledging in writing an important strand of South Africa's history, foreseeing that it too could be a victim of exile at some point in the future. He could not imagine modernity without its past: "The idea, therefore, of a 'great modern age' in which past generations are viewed with disdain is inconceivable,"<sup>174</sup> perhaps with prescience as literary critics embarked on their own post-modern phase. Kunene acknowledges that knowledge is "discarded" (xv) by each generation but that "because history is continual it contains elements that are also relevant to future realities" (xv). These elements are necessarily reworked by the present and so for him, literature represents a remodelling of past relationships

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<sup>171</sup> Kunene, *The Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain*, xiii.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>173</sup> Shelley, *The Narrative Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley Arranged in Chronological Order with an Introduction by C.H. Herford*, 110.

<sup>174</sup> Kunene, *The Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain*, xiv. Further citations of this work are given in the text.

and actions. For the exile too the past is ever-present, always ebbing away and having to be reworked into something recognisable that satisfies present need, the gaze from the past fixed on a present turning.... For Kunene, African literature had to include elements of past writing as an acknowledgment of historical reality. He was against writing in a language other than the familiar as he felt that adopting colonial languages was a disengagement from, and a rejection of, African history. Unlike Breytenbach and Celan, Kunene's language was not that of the oppressor but rather one of the many languages that make up South Africa. He was insistent that African literature must reflect a communal involvement in society so that there is no distinction between literary critics and creators and no intellectual elite (xvii): "One of the fundamental demands of the African aesthetic outlook is that the artist must be part of what he/she represents or criticizes" (xviii).

What kind of dilemma, if any, did this pose for Kunene himself during his years in exile? Although part of the African intelligentsia and the official anti-apartheid movement, he was in exile, away from the country of his birth and childhood and all the narratives within the literature that was so dear to him. In his poem "Bitter thought in exile" (33) he writes that "there is nothing that is soft / or brings a happy memory." First we have to interpret the "I" of this poem: is this poem a metaphor for the exile of others, or for Kunene himself? The sun and the eagle, two symbols for his home and his forefathers, both retreat and "voiceless white feathers fall to earth" as the power of the past or the heroes of the present disappear, voiceless. The "victor's power" is an "ancient injustice" which causes "despair." (33). To banish this despair, the poet sings, "but the thieving bird stoops down to steal my song / To sing it like a terror-song" (33). The poet's words are despairing and he is aware of this, he has lost his voice. Interestingly and symbolically the poet turns bitter as he asks "Where are the widows?" For Kunene, the symbolic earth and sky represent the mother and the father. Here the feathers of the warrior, the eagle, fall onto the mother. The mother is then charged with the responsibility of bringing words back to the poet or fight back to the eagle: "is it not them who convert cowards to men of battle?" These questions evoke a sense of loss: of women who have lost their husbands or of men in exile without their wives. In Zulu history many women performed poetry at specific functions, their emphasis being on identity.<sup>175</sup> We know that the men are gone if the women are widows, and yet both widow and ancestor appear to be rendered voiceless and powerless. The widows must become warrior-poets, carriers of the words of the forefathers.

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<sup>175</sup> Elizabeth Gunner, "Songs of Innocence and Experience: Women as Composers and Performers of 'Izibongo', Zulu Praise Poetry" *Research in African Literatures* 10, no. 2 (1979).

Ojaide outlines what he believes are key elements of African poetry. While I have found these extremely useful in understanding Kunene's poetry, his mastery is his ability to successfully marry the past with the concerns of the activist in exile. I am responding, admittedly with mixed emotions, to the voice speaking to us which builds up to an intensity of address even as the poet becomes the "burning forest" to "torment the fools with singing" ("Ecstasy of a Song," 7). We are transported to the world of battle: "those who have seen the centres of madness / Should boast the conquest of the truth" ("Brave People," 5) as Kunene writes the fight for this truth. Truth carries wisdom, "And those who are wise are generous" (5). The oral nature of the written poems is ever-present so we, whoever the "we" might be, cannot avert our gaze.

These poems come to us as traditional, recitative poems talking directly to a subject or an audience. Their themes are battles, war, bravery, love and hope. The landscape is infused with the spirit of the "ancient poets" and "forefathers" and the past is depicted in terms of the stars, the sun, mountains, rivers, nights, ever an awareness of the cosmos through which the ancestors deliver their message of past deeds. Kunene uses animal imagery and symbolism to create his poems which are performative by design. Many African poets focus on content as a social function designed to be performed, read or sung. Apocryphal tales or myths are used as the basis for this content, which is a way of linking the past to the present. Literature is expected to have the cathartic effect of expunging negative aspects from society. The beauty of Kunene's poetry is that because of the universalism common to many African writers, it is possible to read these poems as traditional narratives with a social concern that can find applicability in many local situations. Like Breytenbach, there is bitterness here though it is not personal or individualistic but is often in the form of traditional abuse poems. The bitterness is that of a group disrupted by outsiders. There is bitterness for "little strangers" ("Nozizwe," 2), "rapers of our sleep" ("Police Raid," 22) or "alien prophets" ("Communion," 55), a common metaphor in African poetry for foreigners or colonists. There is disquiet at traitors who turn their backs on both the present and the past. The poem "Nozizwe" (2) is addressed to "a traitor who served the SA police." Kunene compares this to choosing "a lover from the enemy" and uses the accusatory, recitative incantation of "You" to build a case against Nozizwe until her body is swallowed by "the moving river."

Clearly the earth, South Africa, has been shattered by "strangers" and Kunene paints a world of desolation: "Hope for escape is impossible" ("Changes," 12). In Kunene's poetry, images of disaffection are no less strident than those of the other poets discussed so far: enemies encircle, nightmares are plentiful, as "The sunset steals our youth / We must depart" ("A heritage of Liberation," 1). There is the "acrid smell of death," "our comrade's flesh" is eaten by

“vulture.” In contrast Kunene positions his involvement with politics in terms of his past “the rays of the morning” are the “heritage of liberation.” He thus anchors the resistance movement in the past. Without the history of “our Forefathers” (2) there would be no “children of iron”; “the angry generation” that becomes the voice of the “Ancestral Forefathers” (“The Rise of the Angry Generation,” 3). Wherever Kunene can, he sees children as harbingers of hope: a “young prophet” (“Return of the Golden Age,” 16) comes with peace to bring life to the old warriors. Kunene also uses the battle imagery of the past to stir resistance, urging a recruit not to “fail the Forefathers” (“To a Friend Whose Family was Killed,” 4). Children have to learn from someone, hence this becomes the role of the poet: to carry the words of the ancestors, the wise ones, through the tale of the poem. Children will find “affluence” in the “fathers of the poet” who “will rise like the sun” (“Return of the Golden Age,” 17) to bring stability and order through the words of the poem.

There are only a few direct questions in the poems of this volume which evoke proverbs or sayings from Zulu tales. One is: “Every stranger has a home then?” (“The maturation of a Philosopher-Poet,” 19) asking the philosopher poet to create a home with words of wisdom and invoking the potentially universal notion of the generosity of one person to another so mythologized in South Africa. Another is to a South African policeman: “is a goat then cleverer than humankind? / Is the violence of thought more enviable than love?” (“To a South African Policeman,” 25).

### **The Exiles of Ingrid Jonker and Bessie Head**

How does the poetry of these two writers speak to us today? How do we read their poetry when we know so much about their lives? Have their hardships and early deaths been glamorised because they are women? I choose to read their words through the lens of exile, directed then to look for certain signifiers of exile: disruption, homelessness, ambivalence, longing and hope, regret, anger or anticipation, political exclusion, incarceration, symbolic identifiers of a stolen past or a rootless, peripatetic, wandering gaze. I look for their voices as representative of a greater whole or a common language or an ambience which reflects the broader communities within which they lived. I look for dissonance and protest as exemplars of the lack of cohesion in their worlds as they carve their own distinct ways with words, their poetics of altruism. I seek their world, their own inner isolation as well as their own individual responses to their lives within my construct of exile. I read, in other words, with memory and apprehension.

At his inaugural address in 1994 as South Africa's first President, Nelson Mandela recited Ingrid Jonker's famous poem, "The Child who was shot dead by soldiers at Nyanga." The symbolism of the poet's tragic death was not lost on Mandela. Jonker had written the poem in 1960 after seeing a newspaper report of the death of a mother and child in Nyanga, a township outside Cape Town. The poem became a subsequent source of annoyance for publishers who felt it was too political to include in collections of her poems. As censorship of Afrikaans writing was virtually non-existent at the time, the deliberate targeting of Jonker had another root. To read the poem in the context of our other exilic poets is to read it as a dirge and an assertion of rights expressed almost in the language of the poets to the people:

The child is not dead  
the child raises his fist against his mother  
who screams Afrika! shouts the scent  
of freedom and heather  
in the locations of the surrounded heart.<sup>176</sup>

Many allusions crowd these words: Jonker's disbelief in the random shooting of the child as his mother tried to protect him, the image of a raised fist in protest, a symbolic sign of assertion belonging to the civil rights movement in America at that time, Afrika, here spelt to signify a different place to the Africa of the past. And there beyond death was a freedom from locations (one of the words used for townships), a child surrounded by the military, in life and death a place or location of love buried in a mother's heart. This poem has become an iconic palimpsest of South African military brutality in the same way as the photo of Hector Peterson, shot in the Soweto Riots of 1976. The poem also became a symbol of Jonker's resistance as she struggled to ensure that her very individual and creative talent followed its own course away from the stifling conservatism of her family background. Death stalked her life and her words.

Ingrid Jonker and Bessie Head were contemporaries born within a few years of one another. Although from very different backgrounds their psychological insecurity came from their childhoods after losing their first possible hopes of home, the warmth, love and acceptance of parents, to personal and political realities which impinged upon these early relationships. They were exiled from the security of a communal belonging and the tenor of their writing reverberates with these key losses in their lives.

Jonker was born into a prominent Afrikaans family. Her father, Abraham Jonker, became a Member of Parliament and a key proponent of pre-publication censorship in South Africa. He was to support several bills proposing the tightening up of censorship legislation and

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<sup>176</sup> Ingrid Jonker, *Selected Poems*, trans. Jack Cope and William Plomer (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), 27.

was instrumental in the introduction of the notorious Censorship Act of 1960. Jonker's early childhood was troubled by her parent's divorce and her early emotional estrangement from her father. She wrote poems for church services in the Cape Flats where she was exposed to a mixed environment which included people from the Coloured community.<sup>177</sup> Bessie Head was born to a white mother who had engaged in a then-illicit and illegal affair with an unknown black man and so Head's future was initially determined purely by her appearance. Despite being registered as "white," her grandmother placed her with a poor mixed-race adoptive family and later sent her to an Anglican boarding school that took in the children of single mothers or mixed-race alliances. A teacher recognised her love of books and identified a library which allowed her entry, the M. L. Sultan Library used primarily by Natal Indians. Here she was influenced by books on Gandhi and Hinduism and eventually moved to Cape Town in search of independence. Jonker spent her early childhood and adulthood in Cape Town and both Jonker and Head had brief sojourns in Johannesburg where they wrote articles for *Drum Magazine*, Head meeting Brutus, Nkosi and Can Themba through her work there.<sup>178</sup> In Cape Town, Jonker concentrated on her poetry while Head worked as a reporter for the *Golden City Post*. Both writers show the slow awakening of a political consciousness and, for Head, an awareness of the dreadful burdens of social stratification and identity issues among the much more clearly defined Cape Coloured community. Always conscious of her own fragile self, Head struggled to express herself through her writing and at this stage, attempted poetry as a medium for emotion. Her previously unpublished poems were given to the National English Language Museum (NELM) after her death and were subsequently discovered by Paulette Coetzee and Craig Mackenzie.<sup>179</sup> Both Jonker and Head had politics thrust on them. This initial burden was to develop in them a shifting resilience which could create or destroy a place or home in the unstable environment that defined them. To do this, they both turned to writing. Reading their poetry and non-fiction, there is a sense of defeat that their desire to be simply people was destined to fail. Both appear to have had unsuccessful relationships although both had one child, Bessie Head, a son, and Ingrid Jonker, a daughter. There is a negativity and ambivalence in their poems towards men and love that forms a persistent trope. The desire to be humans first, neither people of colour or gender, is a common feature of our exilic poets.

Bessie Head's poetry reflects the problem of identity as she wonders if she is an:

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<sup>177</sup> M.J. Daymond et al., eds., *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2003), 307.

<sup>178</sup> Gillian Stead Eilersen, *Bessie Head: Thunder Behind Her Ears* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995), 42.

<sup>179</sup> Bessie Head, "Unpublished Early Poems," *English in Africa* 23, no. 1 (May, 1996).

Idealist,

.....  
Bold, reckless, impatient;  
Static, placid,  
Of no certain direction;  
Isolated, like driftwood  
(“Self Portrait,” 40)

Her isolation was a constant companion: “But nothing can take away the fact that I have never had a country; not in South Africa or in Botswana where I now live as a stateless person.”<sup>180</sup> Through her *Drum* connections, Bessie Head felt an attraction towards the Africanist sentiments of the Pan-African Congress. She was particularly influenced by the decision of the PAC to extend their definition of an African to specifically include people defined as Coloured. Through her reading, Head was exposed to George Padmore’s *Africa and World Peace*, stating that Padmore had given her “a new skin and a new life . . . What else does the liberation of Africa mean to me but this inner awakening and alertness.”<sup>181</sup> In the early 1960s, Head joined the PAC and was later to meet and correspond with Robert Sobukwe. Farred’s exploration of the way a Coloured identity was constructed through the apartheid years is crucial to an understanding of Head’s struggle for identity in a racially defined society. Hers was an ambiguity that went to the heart of the very concept of being constructed as “Coloured,” of colour but being of mixed colours, and labelled by those on both black and white sides of the colour spectrum as “different.” Farred has shown how this construct of difference played a part in the 1994 elections where the results in the Western Cape showed ambivalent support for the ANC, perceived as a “black” political party.

In a long poem “Mr Nobody,”<sup>182</sup> Head’s world is one of “scattered skeletons of emptiness” as she listens to the political rhetoric around her: “Live this way. Think that way. And so on. And so on.” Yet her Mr. Nobody, whose body washed up on the beach, “dared to dream” and landed up a lost nobody, a “face, blotted out” (43). Dreams of a future seem to be missing from both Jonker and Head; if anything, Jonker seems haunted by death. In this poem, Head’s guilt that she did not care enough pervades the poem, “Forgive, forgive.” Her later poem, “Where the wind don’t blow” (45), is superficially jocular and shows the influences of the jazz world of Johannesburg: “My home is someplace / Where the wind don’t blow.” This refrain of a home being “anyplace” becomes a major signifier through Head’s writing. She is constantly trying to create a sense of cohesion between her self and her outer environment: “it’s lonely my home,” (46) “it’s a cage” which breathes a “deep dark black peace,” her language challenging the

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<sup>180</sup> ———, *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 28.

<sup>181</sup> Eilersen, *Bessie Head: Thunder Behind Her Ears*, 45.

<sup>182</sup> Head, “Unpublished Early Poems,” 41. Further citations of this work are given in the text.

concept of the white dove of peace. Peace can only be black in a world of apartheid. Eilersen refers to Head's only published poem "Things I don't like"<sup>183</sup> in which she expresses the problems of blackness. By the time of "Where the wind don't blow" Head had chosen the path of resistance while still rebelling against a label of colour despite the warmth of the Coloured community of District Six. Her loneliness intensified when Dennis Brutus left South Africa on an exit permit and she finally fled to Botswana to take up a teaching post in the small village of Serowe. To her intense dismay and surprise she suffered a double exile, being discriminated against by the Botswanans amongst whom she lived, viewed as an outsider, a refugee who did not belong to the village culture of Serowe, where she once more attempted to create another home and identity. Movingly describing her search for roots,<sup>184</sup> Head found a peace of sorts in a poetic imaginary of rural Africa.

Head's peripatetic life is mirrored by Jonker's. André Brink writes openly and movingly about his love for Ingrid Jonker and her influence on his writing.<sup>185</sup> Jonker made a name for herself as an Afrikaans poet and was able to travel and write, meeting Breyten Breytenbach in Paris. Yet her relationships with publishers were constantly shadowed by her poem "The Child who was shot dead by soldiers at Nyanga," which one publisher would only publish under the title "Die Kind" ("The Child"), and by her father's dogged determination to introduce stringent censorship into South Africa. Jonker herself did not see this poem as political.<sup>186</sup> Her *Selected Poems*<sup>187</sup> are lyrical love poems which cascade back and forth between acceptance and rejection, using images of nature to expand her world: "I went to search for my own heart / and after I had lost my way / in the days that trail by with their leaves" ("I went to search for my own heart," 23). There are recurrent images and personifications of being alone "they picked me from the others to endure / me in this prison where I stand alone" ("At the Goodwood Agricultural Show," 14), there is the constant "unreality / of the world" and "the rejection / of the world" ("On all the faces," 17). We know that Jonker was pregnant twice and had one abortion. No longer pregnant, Jonker only plays "that I'm happy" ("Pregnant Women," 18) as her "bloodchild" is born, she lies under the sewer. Here her images crowd her own perspective so that as a reader, I cannot define her emotions or her state of mind. Her predominant mood is distress.

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<sup>183</sup> Eilersen, *Bessie Head: Thunder Behind Her Ears*, 54.

<sup>184</sup> Bessie Head, "A Search for Historical Continuity and Roots," in *Momentum: On Recent South African Writing*, eds. M.J. Daymond, J.U. Jacobs, and Margaret Lenta (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1984).

<sup>185</sup> Brink, *A Fork in the Road: A Memoir*, 92-112.

<sup>186</sup> Cope, *The Adversary Within: Dissident Writers in Afrikaans*, 83.

<sup>187</sup> Jonker, *Selected Poems*. Further citations of this work are given in the text.



Jonker openly rejected censorship with the result that her father ceased to have any contact with her. Increasingly depressed and unhappy she continually foresees her own death: “I looked down from the mountain and saw I was dead.” In this poem, “Seen from the wound in my side,” (29) Jonker identifies her “people” as those who “would crucify me again and again who come to save them,” yet believes they have the possibility of redemption: “because I saw how you beloved John / laid your hand on the shoulder of the black man with the cross” (29). In the beautifully evocative lyric “Daisies in Namaqualand” (33), Jonker takes the delicate, yet hardy sun-loving drought proof daisy as her symbol of exile:

.....  
 Behind the closed-up forehead  
 where perhaps another shoot falls  
 of a drowned springtime  
 Behind the shot-down word  
 Behind our divided house  
 Behind the heart shut against itself  
 Behind wire fences, camps, locations  
 Behind the silence where unknown languages  
 fall like bells at a burial  
 Behind our torn-up land  
  
 sits the green praying mantis of the veld  
 And we hear still half-dazed  
 little blue Namaqualand daisy  
 something answer, and believe, and know.

We wait to hear the poet’s cry but her exile is too deep, too sorrowful and too shut-down to reach us. She wanders through the divided torn-up land with her heart confused by the hardness of those in power, hidden “away in my word” (“L’art poétique,” 35) from the “violence of a simple recollection / in your drowned hands.” Then, towards the end of her short life, Jonker suddenly and powerfully surprises us once more with her death-laden pessimism:

I am with those  
 Who abuse sex  
 Because the individual doesn’t count  
 .....  
 with those coloured, African disposed  
 with those who murder  
 because every death affirms anew  
 the lie of life  
  
 And please don’t forget  
 About justice it doesn’t exist  
 About brotherhood it’s deceit  
 About love it has no right  
 (“I am with those,” 50)

Here her courage fails her; she loses hope, there is no utopia or promise of reprieve: “my parents have broken themselves off from my death” (“I drift in the wind,” 51) and indeed Abraham Jonker forbade poetry reading at his daughter’s funeral, after she walked into the sea in Cape

Town at the age of 33. Jonker finally calls “my nation” to “follow my lonely fingers / . . . my Black Africa... / My people have rotted away from me / what will become of the rotten nation” (51). Her detachment and disillusionment drifts in the wind; there is no solace; no hope; no joy and in the end only a bitter and tragic exile from her unhappy world. Mandela, tellingly, gave Jonker a home beyond her poetry.

Until her early death, Bessie Head continued to ruminate on writing and politics:

Possibly too, Southern Africa might one day become the home of the storyteller and the dreamer, who did not hurt others but only introduced new dreams that filled the heart with wonder.<sup>188</sup>

In the poetry of Head and Jonker I find the sense of exile I was seeking in these two writers yet with the curious absence of hope. There is pessimism in the search for dreams, a wonder beyond reach. The personal darkness of their vision stands in dramatic contrast to those poets who defined themselves in terms of their commitment to a changed South Africa and who made their writing a part of that process.

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While writing this chapter over dispersed weeks, I have recalled a highveld sky-blue, the light intensely bright, the sounds and music of Alexandra across the fence and the words of these poets in my pocket. Nevertheless I hope a critical appraisal of their poetry has revealed the complexity of both the construct and the lived reality of exile from, or within, South Africa. I have not relied on either critical memories of, or simple nostalgia for, my literary companions in that conflicted apartheid society, tempting as this might have been.

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<sup>188</sup> Head, *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings*, 103.

## Chapter 8: Singing a Way Out of Exile

This was Britain in the 1960s, warm and welcoming and available on one level, totally insular in another. Todd could not adjust to this culture, nor could he be reconciled to exile. His soul started to die then. His cultural environment was totally different and foreign to the cultural, musical environment here in Britain... Exile inflicted a great tragedy on me and my family, by taking Todd away...But my mind has been considerably broadened since I left the stuffy, destructive confines of our apartheid prison in 1960.

Esmé Matshikiza, "Interview"

For me the fondest memory of Alexandra is [the] weekend when there was this continuous buzz of music – the throb of music throughout its length and breadth. Music was practiced very fervently in Alex. The influence came from the Afro-Americans especially although musicians also found their own bases – Morabi, Mbatlanga and many other forms.

Mongane Serote, "Interview"

... there is no French identity or French heritage sites that don't simultaneously encompass the elsewhere and the here. In other words, the elsewhere is a constituent of the here, and vice-versa. There is no longer an "inside" cut off from an "outside," a past cut off from a present. There is a time, that of the encounter with the Other, which unfolds constantly and which consists not of scission but of contraction, winding and joining. Here, in any case, is a map of the subject and a geography that makes it possible to pose in another way the burning questions of the suburban ghettos, the nation, even of immigration.

Achille Mbembe, "What Is Postcolonial Thinking? An Interview"

To Mbembe's map of subject and geography I would add the burning question of exile; that involuntary movement, flux and interflow of people living lives through, with, in spite of, because of, and even embracing, the dislocation and dispersion of self and community caused by state repression, violence or poverty. For Erlmann, *isicathamiya* (the name given to the singing and dance of Zulu migrant labourers within South Africa) represents "an attempt to mediate between powerful and seemingly insurmountable dividing lines between the centre and periphery, 'here' and home,'" <sup>1</sup> arguably an intractable problem of representing and being in exile.

South African musical history presents the possibility of understanding how we can apply or privilege cultural analysis as a way of understanding various communities of exiles or refugees in the twenty-first century, as well as a way of seeing exile through the voices and songs of South African musicians who went into voluntary or involuntary exile during apartheid.

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<sup>1</sup> Veit Erlmann, with an introduction by Joseph Shabala, *Nightsong: Performance, Power and Practice in South Africa* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), xix.

Music as a means of political instrumentality in South Africa was also able to produce original and dramatic songs which fused with musical elements elsewhere in order to face the grim, frightening and discriminatory aspects of everyday life. This music can be read as a marker of South Africa's engagement with modernism and reflects a culture able to mix modernity with urbanity and rural poverty as an expression of a way out of exile.

### **The Travelling Metaphor of Belonging**

Song appears everywhere in accounts of South African life, with countless confluences, convergences and divergences of performative interpretation and expression. Throughout this practice, the synergy between poetry and song in South Africa is always present. What is missing through the chapters of this thesis though is sound. In her book on the exile cultures of Latin America, Kaminsky<sup>2</sup> refers to the importance of food as a representation of home. I hope that, thus far, my discussion of exilic poets has conveyed a sense of sound, of voices and music behind the words as the missing ingredient of my thesis, the sounds of ordinary, everyday thoughts as well as those of exile or prison, of banishment or protest.

Much South African poetry between 1900 and 1990 could be called spoken text or written song, whether or not influenced by *iziBongo* poetry. While the aural, performative aspect was often the main vehicle for audience reception, production, distribution, appropriation and transmission, what we have in the written text is a rich narrative of expression, history and testimony. The contemporary naming of specific forms of poetry such as rap, hip-hop, reggae and performance poetry belies the extensive history of spoken poetry which was codified and defined by the English academy in the nineteenth-century. By exploring the poems and songs of exile in this thesis, we have encountered silences, soundlessness, which speak/s to song as restitution, so that writing South African exile becomes a sound archive in itself.

Several historical currents meet to unite poetry and song in South African exilic history. There is the influence of praise poetry and the *iziBongo*, the role of military bands and visiting ships, the need for freedom of expression, the role of speech in a population deprived of literacy, the importance of singing and of church music. We have seen that as legislative control, censorship and repression deprived the population of access to basic human rights, poetry and song proved to be immensely popular agents of change, perhaps because they were also

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<sup>2</sup> Amy K. Kaminsky, *After Exile: Writing the Latin American Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 62-63.

imbedded in everyday leisure activities. Content and reception was often socially engaged through necessity, not intention.

We know that as early as 1774 Phillis Wheatley, a woman and freed slave, published her first book of poems in America. Imperial expansion was at its zenith during the eighteenth-century and caused a material shift in relations around the world. The impact of the slave trade and the long journey forward towards equal rights began with various abolitionist movements which created spaces for representations of cultural mobility in English and American poetry. The symbiotic nature of the development of black songs in the nineteenth-century with black poetry can be traced to the slave spirituals which went on to exercise a powerful influence on both sides of what Gilroy calls the Black Atlantic. Today these spirituals often talk back to their travelling companions, for example to the praise poetry of South Africa, the poems and songs of *iziBongo*, or the griots of West Africa. As early as the mid-nineteenth-century we have recorded written or transcribed evidence of South African songs.<sup>3</sup>

One strand of early influence on South African music came from the many mission movements in South Africa, of which there were about 200 by the late 1890s.<sup>4</sup> Another came from the break-away evangelical movement which rejected American influences and started an evangelical Zion Christian Church in the country. While the missions still exist in South Africa, it is the latter which has a membership of over 10 million and provides a weekly ritual for tens of thousands of people. Organised religion and the radicalism of church leaders was also an influence on the education, writing and singing of exiled South Africans.

We have seen that Charlotte Manye Maxeke, a South African intellectual in the early part of the twentieth-century, was influenced by the evangelical movement in America (African Methodist Episcopal Church and Ethiopianism). Charlotte Manye Makexe had joined the Free Church Choir which enabled her to travel to the United States where she graduated with a B.Sc in 1901, South Africa's first black woman graduate. Campbell recounts that choir concerts "nightly re-enacted the passage from 'barbarism' to 'civilization,' performing the first half of their program in traditional dress and vernacular languages and the second half in English and Victorian costumes."<sup>5</sup> This mix of cultures represented a microcosm of things to come: that South African singers and musicians moved countries and carried with them their own music, which in turn evolved with influences from abroad.

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<sup>3</sup> Daymond et al., eds., *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region* ; Pippa Skotnes, ed., *Miscast: Negotiating the Presence of the Bushmen* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> James T. Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 104.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

Campbell defines the meeting of the two Church movements as “one of the most remarkable episodes in the intertwined history of Africa and Black America”<sup>6</sup> though he cautions that Black evangelicals and nationalists valorised Africa’s past with one eye on “civilised” progress, a westernised modernity.<sup>7</sup> Daymond et al. claim that Charlotte Maxeke “made the construction of South African modernity possible”<sup>8</sup> by bringing black American culture back to South Africa as early as 1901. But it is possible that she appeared more radical in South Africa because of her singularity as an outspoken female intellect. Maxeke became a representative of the New African Movement in South Africa and wrote and spoke on the plight of urban and rural women who were uprooted from their land. Such was the perceived influence of the American Methodist Episcopal Church that Fort Hare was proposed as a higher education institution primarily to counter the apparent radicalizing influence of the church-sponsored education that South African Blacks received in the United States. The black composer Rueben Caluza also benefited from church sponsorship.

Campbell outlines how the influence of African polyphony changed the nature of hymnals in the African Methodist Church so that chanting and repetition became a standard motif and action. We have seen this repetition in many of the poems of South African exiles. The early purveyors of this music were not exiles – rather they were the mothers of the 1950s generation who could freely take their innovative music overseas with the confidence instilled by their elders.

Across the oceans, in England, the influence of the Church was to lay the foundations for the development of poetry as a discipline from the nineteenth-century. However its genesis was in the Church and in song, psalm and hymn. In 1741, the fifth Professor of Poetry at Oxford, Bishop Robert Lowth, published his 34 lectures under the title *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, a discussion of the poems or songs of the Old Testament. This influential book, with translations from the original Latin into English and German, assumed a relationship between poet, tale and audience proposing a relationship between everyday society and those who wrote, recorded, narrated or sang about that society as well as those who then received or read the original text in any subsequent era. Lowth seemed to be advocating a prophetic role for poetry based on the Bible and using allegory for its structure. Poetry’s chief advantage lay in its agreeable usefulness with a capacity to change the hearts and minds of people for the good of society. Lowth used the words ode and song interchangeably. This assumption, that poetry was

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., vii.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>8</sup> Daymond et al., eds., *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region*, 195.

related to song, was common to many of the Romantic poets. Song was considered a medium closer to nature and to the imagination, as well as a direct way of reaching an audience. Shelley frequently used choral structures from Greek drama in his poetry and his odes. Not only did Keats write many odes and songs, he also wrote an opera and Wordsworth composed lyrical ballads.

According to some interpretations, William Blake wrote *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience* to represent hidden republican sentiment<sup>9</sup> protesting about the revival of the monarchy while at the same time using the poems to air abolitionist views, primarily in reaction to the slave revolt in Haiti. Transculturation was saturating these apparently simple images and words. Whilst I will not attempt to comment on the relationship of the *Song of Songs* to Blake's poems, from this biblical source we see symbols which echo through European and Afro-American poetry and song (for example Celan's Shulamith in *Todesfuge*, Serote's *Song of Experience*).<sup>10</sup> Even in the *Song of Songs* the narrator pleads not to be identified as black. Blake called his poems "songs." Just as Blake's poems need to be read with his accompanying paintings, so Blake also wrote music to accompany his songs. Over time, his poems have been set to music and appropriated for use in many different contexts. Legend has it that when Blake died in 1827, he was singing.<sup>11</sup> His *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience* hardly reached an audience in his lifetime. The tradition which Blake followed in his songs was derived from children's hymnals of the eighteenth-century. According to Richard Holmes, Blake's *Songs* "resonate with popular eighteenth-century lyric sounds: street ballads, dance tunes, psalm settings, lullabies, game songs, drinking songs, and street-seller's cries."<sup>12</sup> Through all the poems there runs a sense of Blake's social conscience, his distress at the treatment of slaves in relation to notions of liberty and freedom set against blatant injustices between people and nations.

The important theoretical shift here is to regard the audience as receptive to messages contained within a text, a way of viewing poetry that was subsequently lost with the formalist and new critical approaches to literatures as a self-contained text.<sup>13</sup> The performative aspect of poetry has gone missing in modernist literary theories. Henricksen maintains that "the whole dimension

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<sup>9</sup> Tom Paulin, "The Invisible Worm," *The Guardian* (Saturday March 3, 2007), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/mar/03/poetry.williamblake>.

<sup>10</sup> Celan, "Todesfuge"; Mongane Wally Serote, "From Song [sic] of Experience," in *Selected Poems* (Johannesburg: AD. Donker, 1982).

<sup>11</sup> William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience with an Introduction by Richard Holmes* (London: The Folio Society, 1992), v.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>13</sup> John Henricksen, "Poem as Song: The Role of the Lyric Audience" *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 21, *The Lyrical Phenomenon* (2001).

of poetic performance was repressed, so that the outwardly performed song was divorced from the inwardly conceived poem as it had never been before.”<sup>14</sup> Throughout the world, Brutus’s troubadour was the very epitome of poetry talking and singing to a large audience who were central to the performance. Although Henricksen maintains, with Ong, that the Romantics turned the subject of poetry back to the self, we know that this amorphous group of poets strove for various levels of engagement with an audience and a wider public. Henricksen describes the Romantics as addressing a broad audience with utopian ideals and we have seen a similar use of the lyric in Brutus’s poetry. But Brutus and other exilic poets conceived of their poetry more in the nature of song, to reach and address as wide an audience as possible. However the reality of exile meant that it was song and its accompanying music that stepped into this role. Henricksen regards the formal ballad-like repetitions in Romantic poetry as meditative and private, and there is no doubt that the prison poems of Jeremy Cronin have this quality too. He sees the birth of modern verse in “this detachment of song from communicated meaning,” a sentiment which is not easily applied to exilic poetry. While Henricksen reads in Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry* an unawareness of audience so that “the poet as a music-maker is unaware of any audience he may have,”<sup>15</sup> he sees the poem as the transmitter of music with a moral message. Certainly several South African exilic poets thought it useful to read Shelley’s *Defence* as an address to themselves. The problematic nature of the relationship between the poem and the song is resolved in South African exilic poems and songs by the performative nature of most South African modern poetry and the conscious awareness of an audience even where one was not possible.

In his in-depth study of the music of migrant labourers in South Africa, Veit Erlmann views *isicathamiya* as being neither “reactionary, obsolete or revolutionary,”<sup>16</sup> but rather as representing the concerns of everyday life, whatever these may have been. Erlmann explores the ambiguities that beset ethnography and historical practice in any discussion of performance so that to discuss the intrinsic importance of music in traditional customs becomes a contested area of interpretation. We do know that songs and poems which have their source in everyday custom and life provide a history of representation itself and just as Shelley was reinvented by subsequent generations, so South African songs are subject to the same scrutiny.

The history of the privileging of music in social representation itself tells the story of a way out of exile. The numerous studies of South African musical history rely on two major lines

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>16</sup> Erlmann, *Nightsong: Performance, Power and Practice in South Africa* xxii.



of inquiry: the way in which music in South Africa was influenced by music with, or contact from, elsewhere, and the way in which South African music and musicians have developed, and informed, a sustained South African identity from the past, either within the community or in exile. Music travels; it always has and always will although contemporary composers of what is called “art music” despair of finding audiences outside their geographic homes. So perhaps we should say that music has the potential to speak directly to multiple audiences regardless of language barriers. The body of literature on South African music itself travels over large areas, often with close examination of particular songs or musicians. Social theorists or ethnographers writing about South African music implicitly acknowledge one another and their disagreements. It is not possible to write about South African music without paying homage to the immense scholarship undertaken by Ansell, Ballantine, Erlmann, Coplan and others. These books bring to life a world whose complexity and integration with South African politics and society cannot possibly be summarised in this short chapter. Reading their scholarly and informed writing, what emerged for me was the metaphor of belonging which harnesses the writing of South Africa’s musical history to the desire to create and identify a uniquely South African identity or home. Yet this home, or sense of belonging, was created out of an epistemology and ontology of forced, though not enforced, exile. The latter implies a passivity or captivity which was never present in South African music making as music was not contingent on the state of being in exile.

Gwen Ansell’s book *Soweto Blues: Jazz, Popular Music and Politics in South Africa*<sup>17</sup> and David Coplan’s *In Township Tonight!*<sup>18</sup> cover similar territory. Ansell’s book arose out of an immensely popular radio series called *Ubuyile/Jazz Coming Home*, which was based on interviews with over sixty musicians. Further interviews centred on what Ansell calls “South African jazz in exile,”<sup>19</sup> as well as a story of “journeys in both directions – between village and city, between saxophone and cell phone, between Langa and Cape Town, between America and Africa.”<sup>20</sup> (In 2010, we can note the enduring popularity of radio as a medium of communication and pleasure). Ansell’s book is an invigorating social history of South Africa encompassing the impact of legislation on urban and rural life and music, the Sophiatown generation, the effect of apartheid, censorship, and exile on music-making and specifically the way people had to negotiate politics in everyday life. Exile runs through the music as songs were banned from

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<sup>17</sup> Gwen Ansell, *Soweto Blues: Jazz, Popular Music and Politics in South Africa* (New York and London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> David Coplan, *In Township Tonight!: South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre*, Second Edition ed. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Ansell, *Soweto Blues: Jazz, Popular Music and Politics in South Africa*, vii.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

broadcast and records seized. Musicians were often imprisoned for playing various songs (including songs from abroad which might mention Nelson Mandela) or jailed for performing at mixed venues or at the wrong venues or without venues. Instruments were confiscated and movements restricted, with musicians enduring frequent police raids. In addition musicians were often excluded from the sales royalties of albums. Ansell concludes that it was to the South Africa remembered in exile that many of the musicians belonged.<sup>21</sup> Remembering with music was often communal, often based on, in and around music-making, while for exilic poets, remembering was often a more solitary activity with memories of language or landscape as well as people, politics and the past.

In *Marabi Nights: Early South African Jazz and Vaudeville*,<sup>22</sup> Christopher Ballantine traces the history of jazz culture in South Africa and shows how from the 1920s, A. W. G. Champion, the leader of the Natal branch of the Industrial and Commercial Worker's Union, promoted jazz, sharing an interest in music with Pixley Seme and Dr. A. B. Xuma, both presidents of the ANC. *Marabi* was an eclectic music based in Johannesburg harmonically resting on "an endlessly repeating chord sequence."<sup>23</sup> This music was the main source of influence on the exiled musicians discussed later in this chapter and gave birth to *mbaqanga*, otherwise called African jazz. Ballantine includes Todd Matshikiza's description of the birth of *mbaqanga*: "we recaptured the wonderful mood over an elevating early breakfast of corn bread and black tea in the open air after a heavy drinking bout the previous evening. Gray put the corn bread aside and started blowing something on the five tone scale. We dropped our corn bread and got stuck into Gray's mood."<sup>24</sup>

This 1940s birth of *Majuba* jazz coincided with the strengthening of the ANC Youth League's direction for the future of South Africa and the revival of music as symbolic nourishment.

David Coplan has written extensively on South Africa's performance culture in order to tell the story of "black city music and theatre, and their role in the imagination and achievement of freedom."<sup>25</sup> Discussing the movement of musicians, Coplan writes "there is no contradiction

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 221-260.

<sup>22</sup> Christopher Ballantine, *Marabi Nights: Early South African Jazz and Vaudeville* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1993), 51. This book is essential reading for an understanding of the evolution and development of jazz in South Africa.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>25</sup> Coplan, *In Township Tonight!: South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre*.

between routes and roots.”<sup>26</sup> The essays which make up *Composing Apartheid: Music for and Against Apartheid* also revolve around the trope of borders, “by looking beyond apartheid’s geographic and temporal borders.”<sup>27</sup> Olwage calls exile “one of apartheid’s most dramatic separations,” positing that “the separations of exile indeed globalised South African music.”<sup>28</sup> Erlmann, with reference to Baudrillard, regards this appropriation as the loss of a specific South African identity. Those features of the music once labelled South African lose their specificity. Listening to South Africa’s 2010 FIFA World Cup Song, sponsored by Coca-Cola (written by the Somalian-Canadian hip-hop artist K’Naan)<sup>29</sup> I would agree with Erlmann in respect to this song: the words of the opening line, “give me freedom,” stand in stark contrast to the flat tone, what might well epitomise “the disappearance of the Other” just as South Africa once more became the spotlight on many television screens around the world.

Three years after his earlier book (*Nightsong*), Erlmann also wrote *Music, Modernity and the Global Imagination South Africa and the West* - in which he charts specific musical journeys made to and from South Africa, now concluding that “the myriad forms of cultures and diasporic connections” embedded in forms of South African music point to the “irrevocable complicity and interdependency of people.”<sup>30</sup>

As we have seen features such as a refrain or repetition were prevalent in much of the protest poetry written through the 1960s as the ANC sought to build up a cultural program of intervention. In a way similar to the experience of people in the concentration camps,<sup>31</sup> songs were also a record of conditions of suffering, exclusion, hardship and deprivation as well as comradeship and communal identity. Music was not only a marker of difference from those wielding power, but of equality between those who sang, listened and participated in music. As Ansell and Erlmann make clear, music’s role in South African society was much more ambiguous, diverse, ingrained and complex than a simple tool of political change, and because of this complexity, music was naturally a part of the social and public sphere. Nonetheless music has provided some of the most telling narratives of political and social change in South Africa by

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 317.

<sup>27</sup> Grant Olwage, ed., *Composing Apartheid. Music for and against Apartheid* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2008), 1.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>29</sup> “FIFA World Cup South Africa 2010 Official Theme Song,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xhM-cpSwrmM>.

<sup>30</sup> Veit Erlmann, *Music, Modernity and the Global Imagination: South Africa and the West* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 282.

<sup>31</sup> Shirli Gilbert, “Music as Historical Source: Social History and Musical Texts,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 36, no. 1 June (2005).

giving us a vehicle with which to examine public transformations in cultures and communities. Song became the exile's home.

### **Politics and Song: the poetics of connection**

Much of the “world music” we hear today is the music of people who were in voluntary or involuntary exile, people who might have been forced to escape war or poverty or people in search of rights. South African “liberation” songs are written into history and are resurrected for nationalistic purposes, a past revisited by scholars and an older generation or used by current generations of national leaders for their own political purposes. Filmmakers continue to make documentaries about South African music-making in extreme situations (for example *The Choir*<sup>32</sup> follows prison choirs in South Africa over a period of six years and *Children of Agape - We are together - Thina Simunye* examines the role of singing in an orphanage for children who either have AIDS or have lost a family member to AIDS)<sup>33</sup> which, although a testimony to an ongoing engagement with music, are sometimes seen as exploitative. As an audience, we easily seek music's influences and the fusions of multiple cultures; we seem to find those fusions easier in sound than in the legislative language of rights discourse. Typically music audiences can be manipulated by market forces or can be part of cultural threads which move outwards towards the decentred and community-embedded genres of music-making and listening. Songs and poems appropriate these influences, their writers or singers at times oblivious to the multiple specificities and particularisms of history. South African musical history is dense with these specificities.

Song in South Africa is often represented as the will or spirit of the people. Directors or writers have used song in poems and in biographies, memoirs and films to show how an analysis of South Africa's musical history represents the daily life of people inside and outside the rubric of apartheid. I would agree with those writers who see representations in song or music as South Africa's modernist challenge to modernity; the rapid rise of urban culture in South Africa produced innovative and challenging artistic forms and sound, the counterpoint of which, it could be argued, is also represented in some of the exilic poetry discussed previously. South African song has a much richer history than can be conveyed in this chapter.

We cannot categorise music under apartheid as protest music though Ballantine has shown the close relationship between various anti-apartheid activities, repression and the

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<sup>32</sup> Michael Davie, “The Choir,” (Australia: Gil Scrine Films, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> Paul Taylor, “Children of Agape: We Are Together Thina Simunye,” (Rise Films: HBO Documentary, 2008).

development of music and New Africanism.<sup>34</sup> *Marabi* was seen to symbolise a political mood change in the townships, an almost allegorical echo of wider syncopations. This symbiotic relationship is also present in other countries. A broader awareness of music-making in Africa and the relationship of music in South Africa to music elsewhere in Africa places *marabi* within a different continuum when looking at the relationship between music and politics, for example, the people's revolution in Mali with its popular protest, Swahili music and its role in transforming Tanzania and so on. Drewett and Cloonan's fascinating book<sup>35</sup> on music censorship in Africa demonstrates how censorship has been used to maintain hegemonic power through many countries in Africa, as well as in the West. Cloonan finds some differences in how music censorship becomes part of the hegemony of maintaining dictatorships while posing problems for democracies such as South Africa. We might all well want to agree about the possibility of an interconnectedness of people embedded in musical form, that which politicises because its artefacts represent a natural, common bond and experience between people (an essentialism?). However this bond is often the result of necropolitics where music is also used to break the bond and to sever that sense of communal altruism. By focusing on music as a site of contestation, who are we writing or reading or listening or singing for? – not only to speak to one another. Cloonan writes: "There is certainly much to learn and it is hoped that *Popular Music Censorship in Africa* acts not only as an historic record of those struggles, but also inspires more musicians and activists to resist oppression."<sup>36</sup> Drewett and Cloonan dedicated their book to Freemuse, an independent organization devoted to documenting music censorship round the world.<sup>37</sup>

And yet despite the fact that many societies use music as a powerful medium of public culture, the prevalence with which regimes exploit music as a perceived threat continues to grow, particularly in countries where music is associated with values which are anathema to the ruling hegemony; for example in Afghanistan where the influence of the Taliban has led to strict rules regarding broadcast and performance of certain music, or in Iran where there is a thriving underground culture of music and youth rock bands. While we could see repression as a clash between cultures or modernities, music used, repressed or censored in the interests of the state is not new and does not often represent a simple confrontation between power and resistance. The famous example is that the singing, or even the whistling, of the *Marseillaise* was for a time

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<sup>34</sup> Ballantine, *Marabi Nights: Early South African Jazz and Vaudeville*, 55-62.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Drewett and Martin Cloonan, eds., *Popular Music Censorship in Africa* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2006).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>37</sup> "Freemuse: Freedom of Musical Expression," accessed January 6, 2010, <http://www.freemuse.org/sw305.asp>.

outlawed in nineteenth-century France. We know that in many African countries authorities have objected to music used for political purposes (for example, in Nigeria the controversial Fela Kuti was harassed for his music's political message). In Europe, Shostakovich had a precarious relationship with the Soviet authorities which led to his music being banned at various times. In the same way as many South African musicians remained in South Africa during the apartheid years, Shostakovich continued to live in the Soviet Union, in an uneasy and at times turbulent relationship with the regime. The Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis suffered for his activism and was sent into exile during the Greek Civil War. His music was banned in the 1960s as the influence of his cultural youth organization, Lambrakides (analogous in some ways to the ANC's cultural wing and youth league) grew. The Uruguayan Alfredo Zitarrosa had his popular music banned and he himself went into exile, while the Chilean poet, musician and activist, Victor Jara was murdered by the military junta. The general musical and political ambience of the 1960s and '70s saw music co-opted for a number of political causes. The global popularity of many of these songs further influenced and created solidarity among exiled musicians of many nationalities.

Governments impose censorship to wield power and in so doing, create a site of struggle around the censored, be it a person or a cultural artefact. The subtle censorship and control of broadcasting in South Africa aptly demonstrates that during apartheid, official music dissemination to the listening public was a manipulative attempt to control what could not be exiled, silenced.

Before the 1950s the South African Broadcasting Corporation broadcast programmes for each distinct language group, providing a vehicle for the transmission of a variety of types of music such as *mbaqanga*. Ansell notes that "some black social critics were now using the dismissive term *msakazo* (broadcast music)" to criticize the music and musicians broadcast under the Nationalist Government's separate development policy.<sup>38</sup> Legislation officiating against public performance or dissemination of entertainment dates back to at least 1931 when it was enacted that entertainment should not offend religious beliefs, hold various groups in contempt or be "contrary to public interest or good morals."<sup>39</sup> By 1974, this three and half columned statute had morphed into a fifty-three page Publications Act<sup>40</sup> with an entire chapter covering public entertainments, yet the spirit of the legislation remained the same, with the addition of any

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<sup>38</sup> Ansell, *Soweto Blues: Jazz, Popular Music and Politics in South Africa*, 87.

<sup>39</sup> Union of South Africa. *Entertainments (Censorship) Act No 28 of 1931*. Cape Town: Government Gazette, 1931.

<sup>40</sup> Republic of South Africa. Department of the Prime Minister. *Publications Act, 1974*. Act No.42. Cape Town: Government Gazette, 1974.

publication or entertainment which would disturb law and order. Disturbingly, from 1931 until the Film and Publication Act of 1975, legislation made provision for any police or official to enter the domain of any musical performance. However, as Merrett points out, censorship was covered by other legislation which made it an offence to quote any person banned under the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950.<sup>41</sup> This meant that even where the lyrics of songs themselves might not have been banned, if the person who composed or sang them was banned (e.g. Miriam Makeba), singing or quoting the song could be deemed illegal. As none of the official censors appointed by the various apartheid governments had a musical background, the reasons for censorship of music were related to policies of segregation, blacklisting of organizations or performers, the censorship of broadcasting and the cultural boycott. Ironically though, Ansell writes that a cable radio service was extended in the 1950s<sup>42</sup> before the government decided to exercise censorship when they realised the potential of the radio service for broadcasting a political message. From the 1960s any song thought to be remotely political was banned by the internal censors of the South African Broadcasting Corporation.

One result of these restrictions was the birth, in exile, of the ANC's own radio broadcaster, namely Radio Freedom, which was broadcast from several African countries during the 1970s and 80s. The opening broadcast of Radio Freedom always began with the words "This is the African National Congress. This is the African National Congress. This is the Voice of Freedom. The ANC speaks to you! Afrika! Afrika! *Mayibuye!*"<sup>43</sup> followed by the singing of "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" and ending with the singing of freedom songs.

So for political activists in exile, songs became a medium to convey a message. As Jeremy Cronin said when interviewed in *Amandla*:<sup>44</sup> "Song had become an organiser." Yet in this same film a group of young South African musicians argue about whether "the struggle gave birth to song or the song gave birth to struggle." This lively discussion itself integrates both struggle and song into everyday life and hence into a symbiotic and transformative relationship rather than a dialectical one. For Julian Bahula, "to be in exile is a very painful thing...to live here, to survive in England, you have to be strong, you have to get your head together, otherwise

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<sup>41</sup> Christopher E Merrett, "Political Censorship in South Africa: Aims and Consequences," *Reality. A Journal of Liberal and Radical Opinion* 14 (March 1982).

<sup>42</sup> Ansell, *Soweto Blues: Jazz, Popular Music and Politics in South Africa*, 88.

<sup>43</sup> African National Congress, *Radio Freedom: Voice of the African National Congress and the People's Army Umkhonto We Sizwe* (Cambridge, MA: Rounder Records 1996).

<sup>44</sup> Hirsch, Lee. *Amandla! A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony*. 104 min. USA and SA: Kwela Productions, 2003.

you die here.”<sup>45</sup> Even with music, exile could be devastatingly difficult and the relationship of song to struggle personally ambiguous.

Although attempts to circumscribe public music in South Africa (and in many countries around the world) was through the tightly controlled censorship of radio broadcasting, in addition to clandestine listening to Radio Freedom, people could listen to the state-owned South African Broadcasting Corporation which provided a rich and fertile cultural terrain for communities around South Africa to broadcast a huge variety of, not only music, but also indigenous drama. Through these broadcasts the cosmopolitanism of South African music reached the local communities from where much of the music originated in the first place, though, as we have seen, very much influenced by the history and geopolitics of place, space and religion as well as by visiting musical groups and musical influences from America and Europe.

For many exilic writers and singers, to be in exile was seen as freedom to be a musician which itself became the state of being at home, what Olaniyan sees as “the limit of the nation-state as we currently have it.”<sup>46</sup> South African music during the apartheid years was appropriated in several ways, becoming a potent symbol, instrument and image of protest and political mobilization. However there were South African musicians outside the country who saw their exile as a chance to further music production.

Ingrid Byerly<sup>47</sup> and Gwen Ansell are careful to remind us that music in South Africa during the twentieth-century meant much more than representing instrumentality through songs of freedom and liberation. Byerly points out that lauding those who came to represent the struggle outside South Africa leads to conflicting accounts of music and its importance in South Africa, particularly between the exiles and “inziles.” As this thesis is examining the nature of exile as represented by South African poetry and song, I have naturally privileged the concept of exile in this chapter in order to further explore our understanding of representations of exile in song. When we look at the singers in South Africa who were sent into exile, we do not find one unified narrative. South African musicians in exile tell us their music was above all a synthesis or fusion, a result of cultural mobility inside and outside South Africa as well as a creative response not primarily to violence and exclusion, but also to music singing to music. That only a fraction of South African music has been created as symbolic of South Africa or Africa (Miriam Makeba

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<sup>45</sup> Jacques Holender, *Musicians in Exile* (Canada: Nemesis Productions/Rhapsody Films/Casa de Musica, 1990).

<sup>46</sup> Tejumola Olaniyan, “African Writers, Exile and the Politics of a Global Disapora,” *West Africa Review* 4, no. 1 (2003), n.p.

<sup>47</sup> Ingrid Byerly, “Decomposing Apartheid: Things Come Together,” in *Composing Apartheid. Music for and against Apartheid*, ed. Grant Olwage (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2008).



was known as Mama Afrika within South Africa; the South African hymn “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika” is the basis of the national anthems of South Africa, Tanzania, and Kenya) is borne out by some of the extraordinary “case studies” of South African music written since the end of apartheid.

The convivial disputes about the roots of South African music are discussed comprehensively by Ansell, Ballantine, Coplan, Erlmann and others. We know that South African music has symbiotic links to the music of Afro-Americans with deep connections to anti-slavery and civil rights history as represented in music and songs, as well as connections with European classical music, church choirs, military bands and touring performers who were in turn influenced by the variety of musical traditions in South Africa.

When Albie Sachs exhorted his fellow ANC exiles to rethink the trajectory of their cultural intention, he held up some exiled South African musicians as examples, musicians whom, he believed, had overcome the legacy of apartheid and thus of loss, resentment, protest and anger. He wrote:

Listen in contrast to the music of Hugh Masekela, of Abdullah Ibrahim, of Jonas Gwanga, of Miriam Makeba, and you are in a universe of wit and grace and vitality and intimacy, there is invention and modulation of mood, ecstasy and sadness; this is a cop-free world in which the emergent personality of our people manifests itself.<sup>48</sup>

I would like to take further Shirli Gilbert’s<sup>49</sup> discussion of Sachs’ *Culture is a Weapon* speech. If we address Sachs’ provocation (as we know much debated during South Africa’s transition to democracy) through the prism of exilic representation, we can construe that he has excluded Masekela and his musician compatriots abroad from his previous construct of exilic writing as a weapon, and has constituted for musicians a universe of modernist invention from which he previously asked poets and writers to remove themselves in the name of political writing. We know this representation is complex and ambiguous, as politics was incorporated into poetry and music in South Africa in all these ways and more. I refer the reader to the authors cited in this chapter who elucidate, document and create for us, with extensive details and interviews, this area of South Africa’s history. From these accounts however, we can see that South Africa’s musical history *has* helped shape South African identities and that indeed, if we privilege a history of South Africa as a struggle against apartheid, we can read this struggle as represented through a cultural history of South African music. The synergy between song and

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<sup>48</sup> Sachs, “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom: Culture and the ANC Constitutional Guidelines,” 241.

<sup>49</sup> Shirli Gilbert, “Singing against Apartheid: ANC Cultural Groups and the International Anti-Apartheid Struggle,” in *Composing Apartheid. Music for and against Apartheid*, ed. Grant Olwage (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2008).

poetry is sometimes indistinguishable in South African under the apartheid years (see Gilbert's discussion in the same article). During the twentieth-century, South African poetry, as it had been through much of its history, was chanted and sung and in the 1970s and 80s was used at worker's rallies and trade union gatherings. At the same time singers saw themselves as poets and poets as performers: poets appeared frequently with musicians and explored traditional and contemporary lingo based on the music with which they performed. Serote was a librettist for *Phiri*, an adaptation of *Volpone*, so we see a blurring of the edges of genres as a cultural community developed and expanded.

What *is* the relationship between exile, self and national identity-formation, and music? In these representations of exile, I identify the written word and song as text, as objects *per se* embodying music through words and sound, often found only in the rhythm of the poems, the repetition of the words and the performance of the poem, if only within our own four walls. A silent (no sound) reading of the protest poems of the 1970s is often accompanied by desolation and a sense of loss or emptiness as the black and white, the flatness of the page, compels the creation of a performance, a public voice, a poem in search of an audience. The exile's voice, be it as performative poem or song, sings to us of a way out of exile overcoming the interpretative assumptions we have constructed in the modernist pantheon. There is an element of hope in Glissant's description of music as "the poetics of connection,"<sup>50</sup> what Mbembe sees as the "struggle to escape from an inhuman order of things" and Byerly calls "*indaba*," music being the source of reconciliation, conflict resolution and connected spirits, hope in the *indaba* or meeting place of South African music-making and listening.

### **South African Musicians in Exile**

The best known singers and musicians were Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela, Abdullah Ibrahim, Sathima Bea Benjamin, Chris McGregor, Dudu Pukwana, Letta Mbula, Jonas Gwangwa, Louis Moholo, Julian Bahula, Johnny Fourie, Hotep Idris Galeta, Frank Leepa, Spho "Hotstix" Mabuse, Ernest Motlhe, Zigqibo Dennis Mpale, Caiphus Katse Semanya, Ndikho Xaba and Rampholo Molefhe. There were over two hundred singers and musicians who travelled abroad and made, or are still having, an impact on South African music.

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<sup>50</sup> Mbembe, "What Is Postcolonial Thinking? An Interview with Achille Mbembe," <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2008-01-09-mbembe-en.html>. Édouard Glissant is quoted by Mbembe.

For singers and performers who exiled themselves from South Africa to further their musical careers or were exiled once they found themselves overseas, the political struggle as represented by the ANC was not initially their passion. The cast of the immensely popular musical *King Kong*, which had performed to black and white South African audiences and toured abroad, were divided about whether or not to remain outside the country. This was a common phenomenon for South African musicians who were torn between the opportunities open to them in Europe and America and their ties with home and the music of South Africa. Hugh Masekela in *Amandla* wryly commented that Dizzy Gillespie said “I’d like to be part of your revolution because the people are always dancing and singing.”

Hugh Masekela went into self-imposed exile and composed many songs which were directly opposed to the apartheid governments. Abdullah Ibrahim (known as Dollar Brand in the 1950s and early 1960s), Julian Bahula, Chris McGregor, Dudu Pukwana who all felt the effect of segregation on music performance in South Africa also allied themselves with the anti-apartheid movement and played at several notable anti-apartheid events around the world. For Abdullah Ibrahim, “the hardest thing in exile was dreaming. Cause you would dream you were at home.”<sup>51</sup>

In 1990, thirteen years before the making of the film *Amandla*, Hugh Masekela featured in a film called *Musicians in exile* produced by Jacques Holender.<sup>52</sup> I include several quotes from this lesser-known film as the interview with Masekela reveals the extent of dislocation experienced even by a successful jazz musician in self-imposed exile as a black person in America. Masekela had been given a trumpet at the age of twelve by the anti-apartheid campaigner Rev. Trevor Huddleston. He had been attracted initially to the sound: “it was the sound that got me – it was a real sweet sound.” Holender interviewed Masekela in New York where Masekela had settled after a stint in Paris. In New York, Masekela commented, the “Statue of Liberty was a joke.” When he arrived in America it was the height of the civil rights movement and “they were still lynching blacks.” As such Masekela avoided the “symbols that represent the European experience in America.” This experience, as much as growing up in South Africa, informed Masekela’s music. Influenced by Dizzy Gillespie and Louis Armstrong (“those are my statues of liberty”) he soon had an impact on the American music scene at the tail end of the great days of jazz. Masekela made a home in Harlem, enthralled by its close proximity to jazz and caught up by its resemblance to parts of urban South Africa. He was sceptical of America’s ability to provide economic stability and equality: “The European-American is going to be the last one to suffer...the people getting the brunt of the shit are black Americans...Black

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<sup>51</sup> Hirsch, *Amandla! A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony*.

<sup>52</sup> Holender, *Musicians in Exile*. Interview with Hugh Masekela.

people (in America) are a minority. There isn't the chance for them to project." He never wavered in his support for South Africa:

If the Afrikaners in South Africa became normal people, life would be greater in South Africa than it would ever be in America.....I am not the issue. All my energies vis a vis South Africa are based on, like, thirty-two million people being oppressed and I think I'd be more happy when they'd be free more than I'd want to go home. I think I yearn for their freedom more than I yearn to go back home to South Africa...It's very simple, just take a normal society in South Africa for me to go, something slightly better than the US though.

"The good old days have just begun," Masekela later reflected in *Amandla*.

In addition to Chilean and Cuban musicians in exile (Quilapayun, Paquito D'Rivera and Daniel Ponce), Holender also interviewed the South Africans Dudu Pukwana, Jonas Gwangwa and Julian Bahula. Gwangwa felt that:

The most painful thing about being in exile is that you are forever adjusting to different cultures. It gets you to the point even when you are going to be adjusting even when you get back home. I have been teaching musicians everywhere I go. I couldn't be doing that in South Africa.<sup>53</sup>

There is somewhat surprisingly an absence of death in the lyrics of Miriam Makeba's songs. Makeba came to prominence when she appeared in the film *Come Back Africa*, a film made illegally in what was then the Transvaal, showing the disintegration of family life under apartheid. There is footage of Makeba singing in a shebeen. Makeba left South Africa to promote the film and met Harry Belafonte who was enormously impressed with her talent.

Miriam Makeba, Mama Afrika, was exiled by the South African government when she addressed the UN on the 16<sup>th</sup> July, 1963: "The Verwoerd Government has turned South Africa into a huge prison."<sup>54</sup> We see Esmé Matshikiza express the same belief. Makeba had already established herself with the Skylarks, who recorded an album in Johannesburg in the late 1950s, and with the Manhattan Brothers. She was then offered the lead role in the musical *King Kong*. Makeba proceeded to address the UN on two other occasions, in 1964 as well as 1976. On her death on 10 November, 2008, there were tributes from Jacob Zuma, Nelson Mandela and many luminaries around the world.

While Miriam Makeba is the best known of South African musicians to be banned and unable to re-enter South Africa, there were other women performers and singers of note who were exiled. Dorothy Masuka was exiled for over thirty years for composing a song in 1961 in praise of Patrice Lumumba. The singer Sonti Mndebele was involved in the 1976 Soweto riots

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid. Interview with Jonas Gwangwa.

<sup>54</sup> Office of Public Information United Nations, Press Services, *Miriam Makeba, as Petitioner in Apartheid Committee, Calls for Positive Action by United Nations against South Africa* (New York: United Nations, July 16, 1963), n.p.

and fled to Botswana. Ballantine clarifies the specific possibilities which opened up to women in the jazz era when their role in the home and in the workplace was clearly defined as a subordinate one. By becoming performers, women could create a career for themselves which challenged patriarchal attitudes and led to financial independence.<sup>55</sup>

Thus much as constructions of liberation might be informed by a dominant masculine presentation of the body politic, among exiles there were women singers who defied the notion of song as an assertion of masculine power. The relation of women to music in South Africa is complex and has yet to be studied in depth. Esmé Matshikiza, the wife of the musician Todd Matshikiza, reflected on the liberation she experienced when she left South Africa: “We felt happy and relaxed and unfettered and unghettoed for the first time in our lives.”<sup>56</sup>

Gunner has demonstrated that music was used as ways of identifying masculinity. Maxeke considered the problematic notion of “home” for women in an essay written in 1930. “First of all, home is the residence of the family.”<sup>57</sup> She outlined all the ways in which a family as a unit is exiled from the notion of home and the problems of earning a living to actually create this sought after “home.” One of the illegal activities women could engage in was making and selling a home-brewed beer (Skokiaan), a “home industry.”<sup>58</sup> We know that this activity led directly to the growth of shebeens which provided another focal point for music-making in South Africa with women as the publicans. It was as a shebeen queen that Miriam Makeba was to play the lead role in the musical *King Kong*, Makeba herself spending the first six months of her life in jail when her mother was imprisoned for illegally making this beer.

David Attwell is aware that Rosemary Jolly has remarked that his discussion of black African literature is “boys’ games.”<sup>59</sup> The gap in a specific focus on women’s writing and song led to the compilation of *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region*,<sup>60</sup> whose purpose was “a project of cultural reconstruction that aims to restore African women’s voices to the public sphere.”<sup>61</sup> In order to give full weight to cultural encounters particular to women, the editors view their compilation as indicative of “African women ‘making’ a world.”<sup>62</sup> It is in the area of song,

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<sup>55</sup> Ballantine, *Marabi Nights: Early South African Jazz and Vaudeville*, 47.

<sup>56</sup> Hilda Bernstein and Esmé Matshikiza, “Interview, London 1991,” in *The Rift*, 327.

<sup>57</sup> Charlotte Manye Maxeke, “Social Conditions among Bantu Women and Girls,” in *Women Writing Africa. The Southern Region* edited by Daymond, M.J., et al. eds, 195-200. (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2003), 196.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>59</sup> Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History* 23.

<sup>60</sup> Daymond et al., eds., *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region*.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

as well as stories and poems, that women have made a particular contribution to South African culture as well as to exilic representations of South Africa. From the vast legacy of material available to the editors many had come from an original oral source. Some early songs studied portrayed “potentially subversive views of masculinity”<sup>63</sup> or contained obvious erotic elements which provoked the disapproval of missionaries.<sup>64</sup>

Many scholars have commented on the implied masculinity inherent in the presentation of the body through song and dance as an attribute of “courage and endurance.”<sup>65</sup> Gunner analyses the song “Umshini Wami” (my Machine Gun) as an “unstable and unruly” signifier used by Jacob Zuma to resurrect old-style liberation politics into the contemporary public sphere and to seize “back agency and the power to determine the flow of change in the new era.”<sup>66</sup> Gunner stresses that this song made song visible as an instrument in South Africa – song as a construct used to represent an idea. The conflict over the public use of this song raised consciousness of the power of song as an agent. Gunner argues that exilic politics was present in the use of song during Zuma’s trial for rape, song being seen as an assertion of a masculinity that was part of liberating South Africa. This violent song, with its origins in the military wing of the ANC, was broadcast freely on the South African Broadcasting Corporation and reached the same nooks and crannies of everyday life as, for example, Ibrahim’s “Mannenberg” during the 1980s.

It is beyond the scope of this study to look at whether the masculine ideals construed in songs like “Umshini Wami” contribute to the tragically high rape figures in South Africa, or how women have used music to construct alternative identities. In a line from a poem by Gladys Thomas (poet and activist, whose poem was banned with the publication *Cry Rage*) – “Let our sons dazed in eye / rape and steal / for they are not allowed to feel”<sup>67</sup> – we come back, also, to the horror of sanctioned violence. Gunner sees in “Umshini Wami” and other liberation songs “the cultural capital of the outsider striving to become the new insider: both carry the weight of the ‘just war.’”<sup>68</sup> Within this, Gunner asserts, is the hopeful optimism for a new society.

Contemporaneous observations and records of South African music production, consumption, performance and history soon confirm Clark’s argument that:

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>65</sup> Liz Gunner, “Jacob Zuma, the Social Body and the Unruly Power of Song,” *African Affairs* 108, no. 430 (2008) 29. Gunner here refers to other sources such as Johnny Clegg and Lara Allen.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>67</sup> Gladys Thomas, “Fall Tomorrow,” in *Women Writing Africa. The Southern Region*, eds. M.J. Daymond, et al. (New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 2003), 335.

<sup>68</sup> Gunner, “Jacob Zuma, the Social Body and the Unruly Power of Song,” 39.

glimpses of alternative systems of representation are only thrown up by the most intense and recalcitrant effort to make the ones we have deliver the goods. It is only in the process of discovering the systems' antimonies and blank spots – discovering them in practice, I mean, that the first spots of contrary imaginings come to light.<sup>69</sup>

Thus repression, or attempts to circumscribe and contain music-making, had the different effect of producing contrary imaginings which are now well-documented although often not recorded.

That the AIDS epidemic in South Africa and ongoing violence is among the harshest in the world also confirms Clark's bleak view of modernism, the frustration that such creativity does not always have a pervasive social effect. Songs do not create an escape route from an unnecessary grave. If, however, creative responses first appear as "a symptom of a disease"<sup>70</sup> we need to acknowledge the restorative and hopeful possibility that they can suggest a cure.

Ultimately, current South African politics still carries another weight, that of the exile's burden, as the new generation writes its own discourse. The writing of music, new songs, however, has continued as a powerful thread both inside and outside the rhetoric of exile and power. Gunner's analysis confirms my own view that South African music could be harnessed to present a way out of exile, especially as it continues to traverse generations. How it is privileged in the socio-political world, what Gunner calls "this highly charged and unstable public space,"<sup>71</sup> will influence South African politics, people and culture for many years to come. For Gunner the "song is not a solution, only a symptom, a sign."<sup>72</sup> I would argue that song, used instrumentally, can be a travelling metaphor of hope and courage, if only, or especially, if we recognise how it could represent a symptom, a sign or a portent of a society able to overcome the *legacy* of apartheid. This would be a way out of exile or a moving-beyond, a travelling metaphor of belonging-to-exile in the creation of South African modernity.

### **Becoming Our Histories: What can songs *do* in the face of death?**

I have discussed the way in which the historiography or musicology of South African music creates a travelling metaphor of belonging in South African music. In this section, I show how the songs of South African exiles represent communal expressions of altruism. I conclude by asking what songs can *do* in the face of death. If the act of writing poetry in exile creates an imaginative appeal towards a trusted encounter, how does song redefine the exiled self in terms

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<sup>69</sup> T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 165.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>71</sup> Gunner, "Jacob Zuma, the Social Body and the Unruly Power of Song," 45.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

of communal obligation? Representations of the moral responsibility of individuals and societies towards one another became defining moments of the South African exilic experience in song as music's instrumentality became to repair and to move beyond the self towards a solidarity of resistance, to a 'becoming-our-history'.

Poems and songs replay and evoke or convey; they can silence others who become listeners, or invite participation; stir nationalism, emotion, rhetoric, sense of place, history, memory, people; can be organised, controlled, conducted, spontaneous, irrational, loud, private, created, recreated, interpreted, mis/reinterpreted; are sung and written and spoken for/against/with protest or pleasure, joy, distress, distrust, mockery, purpose, self, community; poems and songs represent transition, movement, fluidity, unity, personality, freedom, repression, violence, being free, self, commonality, country, nation, space, place, belonging, exile; constitute and represent, a resistance, absence reaching out, reaching outside/inside, a way out (or in): express solidarity, communication, spirituality, resistance, composition; or are to be created and shared. Poems and songs can stand outside dialogic oppositionals of power and resistance, or exile and home.

If song can be appropriated to support and promote violence, can it also be an altruistic medium through which to represent alternative ways of being? Can the exilic song become a counterpoint to the necropolitics of movement, displacement, exile, war or poverty, as was the case in South Africa when exilic music became part of the legacy confronting colonialism and apartheid? As poems and songs did actually assist in creating a political transformation, what social imperatives are required so that songs can be given instrumentality to create political transformations, to act upon (not enact) or mobilise the enshrined rights of people to live with the basic necessities of life? Why has the UN commissioned a song with the words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights?

The exile faces a world that hopes the exile will disappear, preferably quietly. In Haiti many people did become silent, leaving their voices underground. In Chile and Argentina, the state did the silencing as many thousands of people simply disappeared, quietly. Alternative ways of living often need to be manufactured. So the exile must balance silence with sound. Sound fills or avoids or produces/ends in, silence/s. There is a silence around the poems written alone in solitary confinement or exile. Silence can also create spaces or rests. In musical notation certain types of silences are called tacets (from the Latin root meaning "to be silent") or pauses or fermatas (closed, or close). In some societies, silence creates an expectation, but the unexpected can appear on the other side. Our dialogues, conversations, writing, are punctuated with silences



into which we can ascribe meanings. Some people embrace silence but most resist it when it is enforced as punishment (see Foucault or Gramsci on this).

The South African state thrived on noisy attempts to enforce silences, often with no allocated time value: bannings, house arrest, detention, solitary confinement, exile, imprisonment, separations, suppressions and the ultimate silence, death.

Ahmed Kathrada was imprisoned on Robben Island with Nelson Mandela for eighteen years. In his first ninety days in solitary confinement he was permitted no reading, no letters, no visitors. “Apart from routine interruptions by the sounds of the locking and unlocking of cell doors by warders, and the ominous visits by security interrogators, I have only my thoughts for company”<sup>73</sup>; and with those thoughts came memories, the sounds and images of the past. These memories sustain him as he remembers who he is by recalling his family and friends and his still active, thinking, inquisitive mind, “memory helps us to be free.”<sup>74</sup>

Representations of the absence or presence of “music” (in its broadest sense) appear in some of our exilic poetry engaging with a common trope of music as death-resisting or liberating, be it in a personal, political or socially and culturally transformative way. Our backdrop in this discussion has been the milieu which created song as part of a transatlantic dialogue and which has in turn, contributed to the impact of exilic notions of home and belonging in South African poetry and song.

Music in South Africa as represented by the notion of exile filled the spaces and negations and absences of being excluded from equal participation in and benefits from, the social and economic structures of society and as such created, with melody, sound and performance, a way out of exile and into a socially organized and vibrant society, the alternative country the exiles sought, as is the case for many refugees in our present communities. “Sound, in many degrees, tends to go to silence”<sup>75</sup> (Barenboim), and in the silence the absences intrude with sounds like a whip, a gun, a death cry, or words like a poem, a deathfugue; the way out represented by a song, an anthem, a chant, *marabi*, jazz, *isicathamiya*, *kwela*, *mgqashiyo*. Lilian Ngoyi, an ANC member, organised twenty thousand women to burn the notorious pass books in front of Parliament House: she requested thirty minutes silence from the women as a protest and so “For thirty minutes, a thunderous silence conveyed the message of defiance the women had

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<sup>73</sup> Kathrada and Couzens, *A Simple Freedom: The Strong Mind of Robben Island Prisoner*, No. 468/64, 24.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>75</sup> Barenboim and Said, *Parallels and Paradoxes: Explorations in Music and Society*, 157.

come to deliver to a prime minister who refused to accept their petitions.”<sup>76</sup> Silence, in place of sound . . .

In conversations with Daniel Barenboim, Edward Said evoked the idea of “exiles’ music,” seeing “the absence of tonality” in the second Viennese School as “a kind of homelessness, a kind of permanent exile because you’re not going to come back...not only from the social world but also from the tonal world.”<sup>77</sup> In South Africa the many varieties of South African jazz provided this atonality, stepping out of musical patterns determined by purely classical European music or Afrikaner folk or nationalistic music.

We know that music has existed, or been permitted to exist, even in the most extreme circumstances. Within the concentration camps under Nazi Germany, Jewish prisoners had musical groups, ensembles and orchestras, some official, for the entertainment of their guards and captors, others generated in sudden moments for pleasure, education (in the case of Thereisenstadt) or survival. Ironically imaginings of the characteristics of a group made music permissible *up to a limit* in both South Africa and Germany. For the Nazis and to some extent various South African apartheid governments, music was embedded and ingrained in a cultural ideology of superiority and purity. During apartheid, the Nationalist government tried to control the production and dissemination of music as well as the popularity of musical groups. Yet in Robben Island and in the prisons around South Africa, music and song coexisted with other people, for example warders or officials, as well as with the instruments of torture, brutality, interrogation and hard labour. As Gilbert notes, singing requires no instrument,<sup>78</sup> is easily portable, can be hidden (especially if the language of the song is not understood by jailers), and it can be communal, thus an easy form of communicating and expressing solidarity. Newly arrived at Buchenwald, Imre Kertész was astonished to hear his friend Bandi Citrom sing as he worked. Kertész recalls the lines of the song which worried him slightly, reminding him of the nationalistic sentiments of the military police.<sup>79</sup> The superb organization of the prisoners on Robben Island resulted in pockets of entertainment, while some songs were written explicitly to promote unity and to bolster morale. Robben Island prisoners formed a classical and “lighter” choir and had “end of year concerts. Joshua Zulu (Natal MK member) gave special music lessons

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<sup>76</sup> Gail Smith, “Lilian Ngoyi,” in *Women Writing Africa*, eds. M.J. Daymond, et al. (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2003), 241.

<sup>77</sup> Barenboim and Said, *Parallels and Paradoxes: Explorations in Music and Society*, 49.

<sup>78</sup> Gilbert, “Music as Historical Source: Social History and Musical Texts,” 117.

<sup>79</sup> Imre Kertész, *Fateless*, trans. Christopher C. Wilson and Katharina M. Wilson (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1992), 103.

to those who seriously wished to learn.”<sup>80</sup> Many trade unions encouraged workers to write songs and to sing both to further political aims but also because singing was already part of the social culture of the workers.

In the fictional account of his imprisonment on Robben Island, D. M. Zwelonke shows us the heart of prison brutality. He also takes us to the songs and music that sang a way out of exile, writing movingly from a prison community where music and songs also played their part, just as poetry did for Dennis Brutus and Jeremy Cronin. If it was altruistic to write poetry in the face of possible death, it was equally courageous to keep singing. Music and song runs through Zwelonke’s account. A long poem/song, “Thabo’s Song to Sobukwe,”<sup>81</sup> is part of the Robben Island narrative where concerts, singing, performance were a way of relieving “overburdened minds” (116). Zwelonke remembers how the “Summitones, the best combo group on the Island, would give us the latest hit; then The Islanders would come on, another magnificent group” (117).

Some of the songs derided the warder looking on. ...In English it went like this:  
Solo: Hello, my baas, what is wrong with your head today?  
Chorus: It is mixed up and crazy.  
Solo: You stand and look on, what is wrong with your head today?  
Chorus: It is mixed up, crazy. (34)

Ansell, and interviews in *Amandla*, show how time and time again musicians were able to mask the intent of their songs by slight changes of words or by using languages not understood by police, government officials, warders or even censors and record producers. Another song Zwelonke mentions was sung in Xhosa and meant: “this snout of a white man wipes the mucus off his snout with his tongue” (35). Song offered a collective way to be rude, to express disgust and frustration and anger, and to do so as mockery which would not be understood as such by the ruling hegemony and could not be coopted to a hegemonic intent as the South African Broadcasting Corporation tried to do.

Zwelonke describes how songs were sung “to mark the end of the day. ...one could not help feeling inspirited and rededicated when such songs were poured out with intense feeling and conviction....” (35) such songs acting like food for the spirit. Time off from hard labour often involved concerts: “The Islanders, a combo group from A4, [a cell block] gave us a hell of an entertainment” (66). For Zwelonke’s fictional persona, the songs from the Island Choir evoked a tremendous “piercing nostalgia, the longing...longing...” (66). Breaking stone in the quarry is

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<sup>80</sup> Kathrada and Couzens, *A Simple Freedom: The Strong Mind of Robben Island Prisoner, No. 468/64* 65.

<sup>81</sup> D.W. Zwelonke, *Robben Island* (London: Heinemann, 1973), 106-111. Further citations of this work are given in the text.

experienced or remembered as song: “They beat in harmony, hammering to the rhythm of a traditional song of the Xhosa warriors” (66). The back-breaking work becomes a “performance” which the “colonels” come and watch (35). The quarries also provided the source of clandestine political and academic education given by prisoners to their fellow inmates.

Jeremy Cronin, as a white imprisoned in Pretoria Central, reflected that singing became a powerful means of expressing solidarity with those about to be hanged.

“*Nkosi sikele*” we try singing, at night.  
Us down here, to you,  
Three condemneds [sic], along there.

*Morena*...we whiteys sing,  
*Mayibuye iAfrika*, and muffled  
*Far-off chortling, you guys* [sic]  
Call back: *Encore! Encore!*

Then it’s you singing slow...<sup>82</sup>

And the poem walks slowly on with the singing prisoners to the gallows.

Ronnie Kasrils was a filmmaker, poet, activist and member of the South African Communist party who held senior positions within the ANC, including a period as Minister of Intelligence Services in the Mbeki government. In the film *Amandla*, he gives a moving reading of his poem to Vuyisile Mini, “Mini big strong smiling Mini” who “did not smile on this day” as he walked to the gallows, “the eyes grim, always grim when facing the enemy.” Kasrils reads: “How did Mini and my brothers die in that secret lonely place, you may well ask. Please, let me tell you, I know.”<sup>83</sup> The slow addendum of “I know” tells us that Kasrils himself was behind bars with Cronin in Pretoria Central when Mini walked to the gallows. Helped by graphical representations and actual pictures of the gallows as well as an interview with a hangman, we can imagine how Mini and his comrades walked to their deaths, “singing yes, but how they sang ... heads high they walk, strong, united together, singing Mini’s own song: *Naants’indod’emnyama*, Watch out Verwoerd.” (Prime Minister when Mini was hanged). Ansell notes that Mini loved classical music<sup>84</sup> and was a member of several choirs, reminding us of the multifaceted and contested nature of music in South Africa. “Men are singing on the way to death while we women sing in prison and at gravesides”<sup>85</sup>: For Thandi Modise, singing in prison prevented her suicide and the safe birth of her daughter. Here *Amandla* presents singing in the face of death as courage, an act of altruism for fellow prisoners.

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<sup>82</sup> Jeremy Cronin, “Death Row,” in *Cronin, Jeremy* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987), 38.

<sup>83</sup> Hirsch, *Amandla! A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony*.

<sup>84</sup> Ansell, *Soweto Blues: Jazz, Popular Music and Politics in South Africa*, 117.

<sup>85</sup> Hirsch, *Amandla! A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony*.

In solitary confinement, all sound takes on meaning and, as we have seen, Cronin's poems from *inside*<sup>86</sup> dissect the meaning of language as the tongue explores the palate to create sound: "tchareep grrrtch/tchareep tchareep tchareep" and "kree-kree-kree-kree / ssszzzz," where, in Plato's Cave,<sup>87</sup> they do not forget that sounds "bathed in the daylight / may / someday, grow into words." Cronin sets himself the task "to learn how to speak / With the voices of the land,"<sup>88</sup> and it is in these voices we can find a construct of exile in the music and songs of South Africa as that which avoids silence or silencing, even if, in Ansell's view, music was often made at the social and physical margins<sup>89</sup> of a white centre such as garages, steps, basements, townships, shebeens. However, her book is at pains to show the roots of music in homes, churches, even schools and before the 1950s, the school curriculum for those lucky enough to be offered a musical education at school.

On the margins, prison culture developed from the talents of the inmates. David Evans directed *Henry IV* in Pretoria's Local Prison where one of his fellow-prisoners, Paul Trehwela, was the son of Ralph Trehwela who composed "So long Sarie," the South African army's song during the World War II. In his "Lovepoem from Prison" David Evans finds solace in prison as a place where "we live brick-bottled up with hope," where "a caged bird sings."<sup>90</sup> The poems of exiles are songs which beat "a wanting to return"<sup>91</sup> ("Poem from One Exile to Another"), the rhythm syncopated with home. "Mayibuye Mayibuye / Mayibuye i-Afrika", he sings the poignant refrain of the exile's song. He remembers Vuyisile Mini who "sang not of death / but of life and hope and victory. / No birds sing on Scotland Road / perhaps they are waiting for a song."<sup>92</sup> After five years in prison, Evans went into exile and took up residence in Liverpool where he continued to work with literature and poetry, starting the Scotland Road writers group for working class residents of the area. He soon taught the group the art of writing about their daily lives. Jimmy McGovern, the well-known British TV drama writer, started his career in Scotland Road, which was also the impetus for the black writers' group Toxteth 8. The song arrived, but in Evans' early years in exile, these writers were missing, "waiting for [the] song" which Evans had found in Pretoria Local. What is apparent in Evans' poetry is the fear he had to

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<sup>86</sup> Cronin, *Inside*, 54.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>89</sup> Ansell, *Soweto Blues: Jazz, Popular Music and Politics in South Africa*, 76.

<sup>90</sup> David Evans, "Lovepoem from Prison," in *Poets to the People*, ed. Barry Feinberg. Enlarged ed. (London: Heinemann, 1980), 15.

<sup>91</sup> ———, "One Exile to Another," in *How Strong the Roots: Poems of Exile*, ed. Howard Sergeant (London: Evans Brothers Limited, 1981), 35.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

overcome to become politically involved and the long hard journey within the country which ended when he was given an exit permit:

I remember there, at least  
though my hands shook  
and the oppressor drove you  
from the lighted streets  
into the blood-scented dark,  
was a kind of citizenship  
paid for in suffering  
a kind of solidarity  
earned by fear<sup>93</sup>

For Mongane Wally Serote, fear was ever-present in exile in Botswana. Here was only one *Song of Experience* where “we choose the weapons.” Serote’s song was one of the “bullet and agony” where death was “alive.”<sup>94</sup> Death shadows his poems, as do the tropes of exile and song. His poem “Child of the Song” is dedicated to James Matthews who sings with “ausi Miriam.”<sup>95</sup> Serote reminds Matthews that “with song and dance we defied death.”<sup>96</sup> From a distance Serote ponders the relationship between words, song and exile: “we will keep a simple speech” which will “define exile as an assault,” “to have a home is not a favour.”<sup>97</sup> That home was a place where “hugh masekela sings / and roberta flack / percy sledge,”<sup>98</sup> the same soul singers Mandela remembers kept him going on Robben Island after 1978 when radio was finally broadcast into Section B.

A brief mimeographed newsletter<sup>99</sup> put out by Serote in Botswana captures the fear, the pace and anxiety of cultural production at the margins. In the editorial, the editor (Serote) laments the fact that “in any other situation, in any place, one can swear there wouldn’t be any PCE (Pelandaba Cultural Effort)” (2). With Serote in Botswana were the musician Rampholo Molefhe and the artist Thami Mnyele and many others who had fled to Pelandaba as a refuge, a home near home. Peculef promotes a “programme of song, dance and movement (which) finds its roots in poems written by writers living in exile in Botswana” (2) so that the poems, in performative mode, reach an audience.

The persistence of memory as part of the social transformation of Africa carries with it the ideals of national unity and stability which belie the sites of struggle for these principles to be

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Serote, “From Song of Experience,” 117.

<sup>95</sup> Mongane Wally Serote, “Child of the Song,” in *Selected Poems* (Johannesburg: AD. Donker, 1982), 119.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>98</sup> Mongane Wally Serote, “Night-Time,” in *Selected Poems* (Johannesburg: AD. Donker, 1982), 58.

<sup>99</sup> *Peculef Newsletter*, (October 1977). Further citations of this work are given in the text.

actualized on a material level. In 2010 Serote nominated the Medu Art Ensemble for entry to UNESCO's Memory of the World register in 2011. The nomination explains that "the word 'Medu' was taken from the sePedi word meaning 'roots.'"<sup>100</sup> In the silence memory returns and we hear the sounds of the pata-pata. Serote is now the CEO of Freedom Park in Johannesburg, a memorial to the past.

From Pelandaba, we hear the rhythmic repetition of the exiled Mandlenkosi Langa's "cold cold city" (13) as he shivers remembering "a mental asylum / whose inmates are running / loose in the country's / highest offices" (13). He sings homage to the "discordant / voices of schoolchildren / singing Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" (14) at funerals and draws us back again and again to the "cold, cold city" of somewhere in South Africa. In his poem "The final clenching," the "martyred daughter" sings "a sad, sad song": "before I'll be a slave / I'll be buried in my grave" (15). Langa uses the words of an American black spiritual sung as part of a poem-song to the dispossessed in South Africa, singing until the day "we are no more strangers now" (Serote, "No more strangers," 18). This issue of the *Pelculef* newsletter echoes with the sounds of Soweto, 1976. "We are the elephant / We move the way of no return," ("Our Spears Are Immersed in Blood," 19), writes Lefifi Tladi, the image of solid, dogged strength appearing amid the small audience of Botswanans and South African exiles. The exiles are left with ever-present and recurring images: "So the memory remains," and "pain and despair" themselves have a "rhythm . . . we never danced for" the fear (Serote, "Notes for a Fighter: For Dumile Feni," 22). The Medu Group mourned in exile.

Among the most enduring images of South Africa the media presented to overseas viewers in the 1980s was the singing that took place at funerals. Enshrined in literature and poetry and film are tales and poems of singing and song as prisoners were marched to the gallows to be hung. The film *Amandla*, heavily criticised by Byerly<sup>101</sup> as a simplistic look at music production and reception in South Africa, weaves its narrative around the reburial of Vuyisile Mini, a trade union organiser sentenced to death for alleged sabotage activities in 1963, a singer considered a martyr and a hero who, as we have seen, went to his death singing, thus setting an example for the many others to come. Here too we could read the influence of the church choirs around South Africa who established song as part of the daily ritual of everyday life in most houses around the country. Song, here in the form of a prayer, is transformed into a show of strength and protest and hope, in much the same way that "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" evolved from

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<sup>100</sup> Freedom Park, "Memory of World Register: Medu Art Ensemble (South Africa) Nomination," accessed June 3, 2010, [http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=30075&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=30075&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html). Part A 1. Summary.

<sup>101</sup> Byerly, "Decomposing Apartheid: Things Come Together," 262.

a prayer to a liberation song to an anthem. Singing one's way to the grave is also a defiant act of altruism waiting for an audience to act, as assertion of existence and being.

In their evocative article, Coplan and Jules-Rosette trace the history of "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" in the collective and popular imagination and memory of South Africans from the early use of "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" as a political song in 1919 to its current iteration as part of the South African National Anthem. The song was recorded by Sol Plaatje in 1923<sup>102</sup> and became enshrined in South African political history from 1925 when the ANC formalised "Nkosi Sikelel'" as its anthem. Coplan and Jules-Ropette give a compelling analysis of this evolution reflecting on the influences of travelling musical groups and church choirs and finally the song's exodus to other African countries. They demonstrate how the song "stands at the crossroads of utopian visions of African unity and political hope."<sup>103</sup> This longing finds expression in many songs of the era and "Nkosi Sikelel'" provided a public instrumentality inside and outside South Africa to symbolise the process of transformation and change. However, I agree with Byerly that South Africans will all have their favourite protest song or key songs of liberation. As symbols, music could provide a source of mediation between people and their social sphere, be it an imagined or real one.

When Martin Luther King gave his *I have a dream* speech in Washington in 1963, his dream could not have envisaged the so-called Tea Party Movement in the United States holding their own rally in the very spot in front of the Reflecting Pool where crowds had gathered to hear King. The Tea Party set out to deliberately rewrite the historic significance of this space and location. Marassa perceives in King's words "song in the moment of speaking...striking literary utterance that collapses and expands the rhetorical boundaries between poetry, speech and song."<sup>104</sup> It is this utterance that the Tea Party cannot make null and void.

With deliberation, the ruling South African Nationalist Party released Nelson Mandela, not from Robben Island where he had been kept incarcerated, but from the little known Victor Verster Prison (now called the Drakenstein Correctional Centre) in Paarl, the home of the nineteenth-century *Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners* (Society of Real Afrikaners) and site of the Afrikaans Language Monument and Museum. This bastion of Afrikanerdom was soon to be transformed by the images conveyed across the world of Mandela's "walk to freedom." Mandela's first public words were free of King's gospel rhetoric and the crowds in Cape Town

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<sup>102</sup> David B. Coplan and Bennetta Jules-Rosette, "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika and the Liberation of the Spirit of South Africa," *African Studies* 64, no. 2 (2005), 287.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

<sup>104</sup> Damien Marassa, "King of Dreams: Dreamworlds Vs. Utopia and the Sonic Temporality of King's Two Bodies," *Johannesburg Salon* 2 (2010), 70-71.



were quiet as he spoke: “*Amandla*, I greet you all in the name of peace, freedom and democracy for all.” The singing that took place in Paarl was not apparent in the media images of his Cape Town speech where an air of tense expectation prevailed. However, in Soweto an open air party was held outside Mandela’s new house and in the Soweto Stadium “Nkosi Sikelel’ ” and many other township songs were sung. Singing was to welcome Mandela wherever he appeared yet his rhetoric always remained pragmatic and direct. Poems and songs had been at the forefront of the sounds and images of change that represented the transition to democracy in South Africa. Yet Mandela’s greeting “*Amandla*,” and the thunderous reply “*Amandla*,” a Zulu word for power, echoed the *a capella* singing of the *isicathamiya*, “song texts [which] deliberately shun a rich, metaphoric tradition.”<sup>105</sup> *Isicathamiya* was popularised by Joseph Shabala and Ladysmith Black Mambazo and, later, contrary to other interpretations, was claimed by the ANC as a genuinely South African “art form.”<sup>106</sup> These and other South African songs were relayed to the world in the 1980s often accompanied by visual images of the townships or the rural areas where they were made and played. The internationalism of Mandela’s release and the local grassroots movements which were so instrumental in bringing it about are symbolic of the symbiotic relationship the development of South African poems and songs had with the rest of the world and of the way everyday life was represented both in exile and inside South Africa.

The grounding of song in a communal experience of solidarity was metaphorically and, at times, literally life-saving. Song in South Africa represented the unexpected sounds of collective and personal memory. The elsewhere of exile is reconstituted, through song and music, as home.

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<sup>105</sup> Erlmann, *Nightsong: Performance, Power and Practice in South Africa* , xviii.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi.

## Epilogue: Sing me a song of history

Because Pelandaba was a house, informed sources insist that it is still a house but it is now a house different from what we knew, in which political exiles from South Africa lived, loved, fought and lost, the final loss being the house.....Anyway from that house....recognising that as an exile one can easily sit on one's backside for years, they formed this group whose main thrust is poetry, dance, song and movement.

Mongane Serote, "Editorial"

I have hoped to forge a trusted encounter with the poems we have encountered in this thesis in order to understand the heart of exile and the altruistic archive created by people who were determined that writing could be a political act. If I have valorised these poets I hope to have done so by proposing a new way of reading resistance: with a twenty-first century romanticism that engages with the ordinary in a text as a prelude to responding to it on a personal and a political level. By placing geo- and indeed bio-politics in our frame, we can comprehend the meaning of apartheid in terms of multiple philosophical positions which privilege the major disruptions, the main "isms" of our time: colonialism, humanism and the body politics that have arisen as a result of immense conflict. Apartheid was one such disruption, the after-effects of which are still *new* as South African histories are being torn apart and rewritten. Through all this, poets like Wally Mongane Serote, Dennis Brutus, Breyten Breytenbach, Keorapetse Kgositsile, rewrote and wrote histories which we are still reading and writing. For this we owe these poets our thanks and a gratitude that the imaginary has become more than a story, more than a narrative and instead an act of intent for a utopian future for which we all surely hanker. This is the task these poets have left for us. This is not the sentimentalism some have found in truth and reconciliation commissions, but a realization that writing a becoming-history places immense trust in future readers.

My thesis has considered whether there were specificities about South African exile which are revealed by looking at the relationship of poetry to exile. These specificities are forever documented and being written in South Africa where culture is often defined with a political agency that can, for example, suggest and reappraise the signification of symbols such as Mandela with a political agenda in mind. Poetry has been given agency in the struggle against AIDS, as a defining part of cultural and everyday life. This is also a legacy of the apartheid years.

Social research institutes such as WISER are probing those facets of everyday life that run deep with histories: light, water, city life.

Greenblatt argues that “cultural mobility”<sup>1</sup> is actually part of a modern age which begins with the French Revolution. He asks how we “account for the persistence, over very long periods and in the face of radical disruption, of cultural identities for which substantial numbers of people are willing to make extreme sacrifices, including life itself.”<sup>2</sup> Curating the Tate Gallery’s Triennial in 2009, Bourriaud coined the term “altermodern”<sup>3</sup> to typify a motif in contemporary art practice, reminding us that up until the 1970s the language of *European* theoretical positionings and interpretative studies had accepted the idea of a static narrative for modernism, based on Western ideals and notions of continuity. Growing awareness of diasporic representations confronted this bias in the West and persuasively gave way to post-colonial and postmodern discourse. The tension Erlmann finds in *isicathamiya*, with “the ultimate impotency of images to materialize in real terms an alternative way of living”<sup>4</sup> is a tension that lies at the heart of modernist exilic representation, an impotency ultimately overcome in the poems and songs of South African exiles.

Mbembe (and Olaniyan embodies the same critical approach) stresses the importance of “Afro-modern thought” which presents “a way of reading globalization that rests on the radical affirmation of the density of proximity, of displacement, even of dislocation.”<sup>5</sup> This is the world also occupied by the exile or refugee. The necessity of containing exile or displacement as embodied in literary representations without examining the reasons for the persistence of cultural identity in the face of horrific geopolitical and human violations and disruptions, compelled literary and cultural scholars to reorient their critical positions. The same challenges faced South African literary and social theorists. By viewing literary and artistic products in the twentieth-century as questioning our modes of interpretation, we can expand our understanding of both exile and modernity into the twenty-first century. How did we arrive at a state of being and a state-of-the-state where, in spite of the movements, the displacements, the genocides and the horrors of the last century, we can still close our doors on the exile or the refugee in this century? This is as true in current day South Africa, where there is a xenophobic reaction to migrants and exiles from other countries in Africa, as it is of Europe, North America, Australia and South-East Asia.

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<sup>1</sup> Greenblatt et al., *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>3</sup> Bourriaud, ed., *Altermodern*.

<sup>4</sup> Erlmann, *Nightsong: Performance, Power and Practice in South Africa*, xix.

<sup>5</sup> Mbembe, “What Is Postcolonial Thinking? An Interview with Achille Mbembe,” n.p.

New interpretations of modernism accept the heterochronic nature of history in which “the artist turns cultural nomad”<sup>6</sup> for the purpose of creating works of literature or art. This intentionality is at the heart of late twentieth / early twenty-first century representations of our society, modernity and self: globalization has given way to a conscious transference of cultural images and artefacts while countries, as national entities, grapple with shifting perspectives of notions of nationalism, identity, political and economic boundaries from inside and outside their geographic and now also eco-positioning. In his discussion of modernity, Enwezor finds an Africa “located in the nethermost part of modernity, relegated to an epistemology of non-existence that has never been modern.”<sup>7</sup> He draws on Mbembe to explain how the cultural artefacts of apartheid arose in opposition to forces of violence and sovereignty, Mbembe’s “necropolitics.” Yet our exploration of South African exilic poems and songs shows how writing enacted an escape from the instrumentality of this bitter period of history. What I have called singing a way out of this “epistemology of non-existence,” this exile, has resulted in a rewriting, unearthing and publishing of the whole interpretative historical landscape of South Africa, which Enwezor sees as “based in a large part on a project of disinheriting the violence of colonial modernity.”<sup>8</sup>

Many writers who find themselves in exile are conscious of the intentionality with which they view the spectrum of cultural identities and artefacts on offer. We have seen this particularly in the poetry of Kgotsile and Breytenbach. South African exilic poetry and song is a reaching out for mutuality. I have argued that the experience of dislocations of geography as represented in exilic poetry and song is the altruistic heart of modernist disruption: I am here, where is the welcome? One answer to this question, and to Greenblatt’s of the persistence of cultural identities is, of course, to examine representations of this mobility (Greenblatt’s case studies) which create our ideas of ourselves and the shifting associations we make between ourselves and our geopolitical and social environment.

As we have seen, South African exilic poets had varying degrees of supportive communities for their writing *per se* outside South Africa, primarily the anti-apartheid movements or expatriate or academic or diasporic communities within which they moved, so that much of the poetry became a personal artefact searching for an audience, often within the political process of change. Writing as a way of representing the paradoxes of exile provided a known medium with which to confront uncertainty and possible personal oblivion. For a poet like

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<sup>6</sup> Bourriaud, ed., *Altermodern* n.p.

<sup>7</sup> Okwui Enwezor, “Modernity and Postcolonial Ambivalence,” in *Altermodern*, ed. Nicolas Bourriaud (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), n.p.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p.

Brutus, writing was an assertion of self in the face of reinvention, presentation or preservation of an ideal; for Breytenbach, experimentation with form and language allowed the self to engage with and confront the challenges of imprisonment and exile. The struggle to confront the realities of movement, change, and exile were also personal and intensely private. We have seen that for the writers encouraged by the ANC in exile, representations of political messages were often deliberately simple and performative, confirming T. J. Clark's powerful argument that "certain works of art... show us what it is to 'represent' at a particular historical moment, they show us the powers and limits of a practice of knowledge."<sup>9</sup>

I have positioned this thesis within the ever-growing body of literary and artistic cultural studies which place exile, movement, displacement, nomadism, journeying, travel and so on at the core of an exploration of types of modernisms and modernities.

I have asked whether the idea of exile in the South African context gives new meaning to our understanding of language transformed into poetry. I have suggested that the distortion of language by successive governments in South Africa before 1990 gave impetus to exilic poets and singers who abandoned or rebelled against officialdom as being too inhuman, and instead used the language of the 'real' world to communicate a transformative agenda to others, often with the backing of the ANC. This invention, in a Derridean sense, is dependent upon repetition to become inscribed in the cultural significations of a society. I looked at South African's contribution to the human rights agenda before reading Paul Gilroy's 2010 book *Deeper than Blue*, in which he also raises the question of why the human rights discourse has not considered the legacy of colonial domination. I concluded that the shaping of various dimensions within the UN had much to do with apartheid and with those who acted to pressure this great hope of a national unity to work constructively for the disenfranchised.

Shelley's appeal to a moral conscience raised the question of who is the audience of the oppressed. This is now us, wherever we are. By not limiting ourselves to a defining construct of what we think poetry should be, we do not limit the imaginative freedom every writer should have. Shelley would accede that we should regard the act of our writing to a future audience as a kind of freedom: the reader can reinvent a text, subvert it or even resist it and the text has travelled then for a reason. Divesting the self of ego is central to the work of the poets we have considered.

Exile has been a constant part of the lives of so many South Africans that it has created political tensions within South Africa in terms of governance. The life experiences of exiles were as various as for those who remained in South Africa - the confluences of cultures were extensive

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<sup>9</sup> Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, 165.

and far-reaching, both on a personal and a communal level. Through this hybridity was this notion of being South African, of belonging to, and fighting for a freedom in South Africa. Here we see the nationalistic imperative which dominated many lives even as some exiles rejected nationalism for a more cosmopolitan outlook, like Breytenbach moving through countries but always still writing some poems in Afrikaans.

Primarily I have hoped to convey the richness and intensely personal responses of the exilic poets and singers to being in exile. We have seen that exile is a lived experience while it might well be construed as a political and literary construct. I have argued that we need to reassess our ways of reading these poems so that a new look at modernity can extend our understanding of why we might avoid the personal or the political in our specificities of reading. A heterochthonous reading sees us opening a space for representations of exile as a more complex relationship between the exile and modernity than can be assumed, by accepting that we are all nomads moving between the signifiers of a global society. Africa will be kept on the fringes of cultural modernity unless we shift our ways of reading and understanding.

“In a sense this book is a collective epic. If it is read carefully, there is a story to it, a unity of growth and composition, facets of a single people.”<sup>10</sup>

I chose this quote to place at the opening of my thesis as it struck me as an important statement for its time. The *Return of the Amasi Bird* was published in South Africa in 1982 at the height of the interregnum. The editors were both academics and writers and the book was published by Ravan Press, a courageous publisher promoting black writing in South Africa after an era of immense censorship. Important scholarship brought together an historical record of black poetry written in English in South Africa, and published for the first time together in book form. The editors proudly claim the poems as “reactive” or “resistance” poems from their earliest poem to the later evidently protest poems. Where possible they include some of the exiles’ poems or poems about exile. I hope to have shown that I agree and disagree with Couzens and Patel’s conclusion. Yes, the poetry we have considered is part of, or orates, creates, a collective epic, what Derrida would regard as history not “literature” (he regarded Greek or Latin epics as historical records which speak to us about a particularity, a singularity, often based on an event). Yes, there is a story, but I have argued that the story, these poems, fall between the real and the imagined as trusted encounters, not as stories. The ideas of unity and a single people are more problematic as exilic poets had various relationships with South Africa and what it meant to

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<sup>10</sup> Couzens and Patel, “Introduction,” 14.

belong to a country. Ultimately exiled writers and singers found the ecstasy of life in their poems or songs and in the fact of being alive, and in this sense they retained a sense of intense individuality despite their collective purpose. There is still much work to be done to look at the cultural mobility and transculturation that infuses these works with such a rich sense of altruistic, historical purpose.



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