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The Exile of Lewis Nkosi

“For a black man to live in South Africa in the second half of the twentieth century and at the same time preserve his sanity, he requires an enormous sense of humor and a surrealistic kind of brutal wit, for without a suicidal attack on Dr. Verwoerd’s armed forces, these qualities seem to provide the only means of defense against a spiritual chaos and confusion which would rob any man of his mental health” (Nkosi 1965, 25).

Born in 1936, Lewis Nkosi was a black South African writer who left in 1961 during the height of apartheid on a permanent exit permit. He was a talented writer, with his best-known books being *Home and Exile* (1995), *Mating Birds* (1986), and *Underground People* (2005). His time in exile was spent in several different places around the world, from London to New York to California, all having different influences on his life. Nkosi was inspired by his time in the United States and was able to produce creative work, while the people of South Africa struggled to “preserve [their] sanity” (Nkosi 1965, 25). While in New York City, Nkosi would be able to see how artists could creatively protest problems in their society and keep hope alive for a better future. Nkosi came to believe that exiled writers like himself had a special responsibility to sustain a South African culture that was diverse and creative, since writers within South Africa were mostly silenced in the 1960s. Nkosi’s time in exile would lead to him writing many different novels about racism and social issues in both the United States and South Africa, all while maintaining a responsibility to give the people of South Africa a voice.

The world Nkosi was leaving in South Africa

Nkosi became a journalist as a young man, working for the popular Johannesburg magazine *DRUM* in the late 1950s. He refers to this time as being immensely ambitious, young, and full of life (Nkosi 1965, 6). It was during this time that Nkosi realized that he had two separate realities, one being the world around him being full of hate and brutality and one being the world he read about in books. At *DRUM*, Nkosi reported the uncertainties of South African lives under apartheid laws. He explained that living with apartheid was not really living at all, stating that, “the total effect of the apartheid laws in South Africa is to make it almost illegal to live” (Nkosi 1965, 25). Nkosi does make clear that not all that was happening in South Africa was filled with doom and brutality in the 1950s; it was also filled with possibilities and hope. “It was a time when people of all races joined together in a massive Defiance Campaign” (Nkosi 1965, 16), which would result in hundreds of unresisted arrests. For the ANC, PAC, and Congress of Democrats, it was their finest hour, with many mass rallies (Nkosi 1965, 16). It seemed that South African activism was in a continuous thrust forward.

However, in the year of 1960, South Africa went through detrimental changes. On the 21st of March, the Sharpeville Massacre took place, killing 69 people. This occurred during a protest in the Sharpeville township where people were gathering near a police station. As Saul Dubow states in his book about apartheid, this would result in police firing 1,000 rounds of ammunition into the crowd who were running away (Dubow 2014, 43). This event would show the world the true face of the brutal apartheid system and became how many in the world viewed South Africa. Nkosi states in his book *Home and Exile*, “there will be violence, murder, and suffering” (Nkosi 1965, 6); after the brutality in Sharpeville there was no telling when or if the violence would stop. Nkosi was also leaving as Bantustans were being developed. Bantustans

were first created in 1959 as resettlements for black South Africans who had no rights in urban areas and were forced to move out of urban areas into secluded areas in South Africa due to apartheid policies (Dubow 2014, 113). The South African government made it seem that these settlements were designed to give people separate but equal development opportunities.

Before accepting a fellowship that would bring him to the United States, Nkosi seemingly has given up hope with the country he lived in. Nkosi described South Africa as “a country with enormous potential but a country at war with itself” (Nkosi 1965, 37). He would soon be leaving behind the brutality, unforgiving laws, and restraints of South Africa and be going into a new world in America. The sixties in America was a daunting and hectic time. This was a time of heightened civil rights protests, assassinations of both President John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., and growing tensions in the war in Vietnam. But it was also a time of more optimism and freedom in the United States—especially in New York City—than in South Africa.

The world Nkosi was going into in America and the start of exile

In 1960, Nkosi received the Nieman Fellowship to study at Harvard for one year. Historian Karin Shapiro has described the tedious process of leaving South Africa for black South Africans at that time. Nkosi first had to apply for his passport; he was required to send in two letters stating his good character, what he was planning on doing while traveling, and documents showing that he would be financially supported by the Fairfield Foundation (Shapiro 2016, 772). Government officials spent weeks debating whether or not to give Nkosi a passport so that he could partake in this fellowship. In the end they would deny him the right to a passport, but stated they believed him to be of good character and not believed to be a part of any underground operation. Receiving the letter two months after he was supposed to start his fellowship at Harvard, Nkosi decided to take the risk and apply for an exit permit that would be a

one-way ticket out of South Africa (Shapiro 2016, 773). Nkosi refers to going into exile as a “complex fate,” but in turn exile would lead to new friendships, more opportunities, and new discoveries of the world.

Nkosi’s experiences in exile

Lewis Nkosi had his first encounter with the United States in 1961 when traveling to New York before starting his yearlong fellowship with Harvard University. His first thought was how cold this strange place was. He referred to America as having a “gadgetry gloss”; he described the skyscrapers towering over the city and the amount of people that filled the streets, and everyone seemed to be in a hurry to get somewhere. The way the city was cold and hard and had a brutal feel to him was not initially pleasing; he described it as being similar to Johannesburg but at least that city had an excuse of being cruel due to its government (Nkosi 1965, 55). Nkosi was beginning to feel doubtful about his exile into the United States, feeling that this city had nothing good or warm to offer him. It was not until a few months into living in the city that he began to let the city grow on him. Nkosi describes New York as a “metaphorically, and really, an awful kind of grabbing, gold-digging bitch, yet capable of extravagant passions” (Nkosi 1965, 56).

Nkosi would then spend time in Harlem, where he dove into its culture. It was here that Nkosi would gain a tremendous amount of inspiration for his novels. Nkosi believed this place to be very similar to Sophiatown in Johannesburg where everyone was rich with life and trying their best to live fully despite hardships (Nkosi 1965, 56). It seemed that the people living in this area had been pushed here and forgotten, always being told they are different, so they decided to continue to make themselves as different as possible. Nkosi would spend a lot of his time talking to the people of Harlem, often in a number of different bars in the area. People would ask where

he is from, and African-Americans would reply back with what South Africa needs, either technology for better standards of living or guns to take care of apartheid (Nkosi 1965, 58). Without ever addressing these comments, Nkosi would start the conversation about black people's place in America. Nkosi suggested that the racism and social issues happening in South Africa are not all that different from situations in America.

Nkosi would then go to Harvard to start his fellowship, and then returned to New York for a three-month vacation during which time he had an apartment in Greenwich Village. Nkosi found himself indulging in the culture and becoming one of its people. At the time of living in the Village, Nkosi was in an interracial relationship. He described one instance that he and his girlfriend saw another interracial couple, and he thought to himself, "this village has indefatigable candor of its loves and its brave struggles against the withering bigotry of racial hatred" (Nkosi 1965, 59). Nkosi found it amazing that despite all the racial tension around the world, this neighborhood would be able to create a bubble around itself and ignore racism.

Nkosi then spent some time traveling the South of the United States on behalf of a magazine called the *London Observer*. He described the South as "mean, violent and utterly depressing" (Nkosi 1965, 61) because of its strong racism. This was a time that Nkosi seemed to be defeated by America and needed to indulge himself back into the arts of New York City. Music became an escape: it didn't seem as much of a type of entertainment but rather an escape from the devastating world around him (Nkosi 1965, 61).

The summer of 1961 was a tough time for the United States. Nkosi describes this summer as "the heat being dense in the streets, rumors of imminent war, murder at the Berlin wall, executions in Cuba, were filling up the newspapers and pouring out the radio in terrifying volume" (Nkosi 1965, 62). Jazz music and blues singers were then becoming increasingly

popular in New York; musicians would play in bars and coffee shops where people would gather to listen. Nkosi viewed these jazz musicians as something much more than just musicians. Nkosi saw these blues singers as creating music in a form of racial protest and admired them dearly for expressing themselves in this way (Nkosi 1965, 66). Other people in this time shied away at protests because of the violence surrounding them, but artists were finding creative ways to still be in the protests without being directly in the violence.

Nkosi would see many diverse artists throughout his time in New York City and how they would engage in creative and inspiring political critique in difficult times. Despite all the darkness and violence (Nkosi 1965, 69), people were still finding their escape within coffee shops listening to blues singers and jazz bands. This was also a time where writers were beginning to express the civil rights movements and other racial problems happening around them. As Nkosi's time was winding down in New York, he found himself feeling depressed about the way the city progressed in a negative direction; violence was becoming more and more common. Nkosi saw that American universities in many respects represented all social conflicts and stresses of the society (Nkosi 1965, 75). This thought is what led Nkosi to start holding lectures at American universities across the country and to begin writing novels to creatively express the tensions around the world. From his experiences, Nkosi felt that it was also South African writers' duty to write about political and social situations happening around them, such as racial violence, social apartheid, and interracial love affairs, which all can bring "social facts" into their fiction (Nkosi 1966, 110).

Nkosi's sense of exiled writers' national duty

Exile was indeed a very strange fate, leaving your family, friends, and everyone you knew for good. Because of the banning of the majority of books in South Africa, who was to

read the books written by those South Africans in exile? “Certainly Europeans, Americans, Indians, and Chinese” (Nkosi 1965, 93): almost everyone but the people Nkosi writes about. The South African government made Nkosi sign a paper stating he knew that none of his future writings would ever be published in South Africa because he chose to leave permanently on an exit permit.

Nkosi therefore did not see writing from exile as only a creative outlook, but also more of a national duty. Despite the fact that no one from South Africa would be immediately reading their pieces, exiled South African writers “must continue to be the unsilenced voice of the repressed millions of South Africa” (Nkosi 1965, 95). He believed that in South Africa there was no shared nationhood due to apartheid and censorship: “bereaving... writers of an opportunity to write and publish their works is fatally harmful to the cultural life of the country” (Nkosi 1965, 127). While in the United States, Nkosi would see a sense of shared nationhood during his time in Harlem and Greenwich Village. These places held a democratic community, which Nkosi hoped South Africa might emulate, in his quest for home (Gall 2012).

Lewis Nkosi would eventually return back to South Africa. His time in exile brought him social and political experiences which would have a great influence in his writing: “In all of Nkosi’s writing it is rare not to encounter a reference to his time in exile” (Mngadi 2012, 48). Exile became a fate that could not be ignored for Nkosi. However, with this fate brought him a life filled with possibilities, friendships, and experiences that would lead to his success in writing. Nkosi would die in 2010 as a famous writer in South Africa. Nkosi did not only see his writing as a creative outlook for people to read but also saw it as giving the people of South Africa a voice that had been silenced for so long, and he saw this as his national duty to the people of South Africa.

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