

WRITING BLACK: THE SOUTH AFRICAN SHORT STORY BY BLACK WRITERS

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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it to any university for a degree.

Signature:.....

Date:.....

ABSTRACT

This study attempts a re-reading and re-evaluation of the work of black South African short story writers from R.R.R. Dhlomo (*circa* 1930) to Zoë Wicomb (at the end of the 1980s). The short story, along with the autobiography, was the dominant genre of black writing during this period, and the reasons for this are examined, as well as the ways in which black writers adapt or transform this familiar literary genre. The title – “Writing Black” – alludes to well-known works by Richard Rive (*Writing Black*) and J.M. Coetzee (*White Writing*), and foregrounds the issue of race and racialised identities. While one would not want to neglect other factors (class, gender), it is hardly possible to underestimate the impact of racial classification during the apartheid era. However, the difficulty of asserting the unproblematic existence of a homogeneous “black” identity also becomes evident.

The approach adopted here reflects the need to recognise both the singularity of particular texts (their “literariness”) as well as their embeddedness in their particular place and time (their “worldliness” or their “circumstantiality”). Literary texts are complex verbal artefacts of an unusual kind, but they cannot be separated from their contexts of production and reception; black writing in this country would be largely incomprehensible if this were not taken into account. Close attention is given to the obvious spatial, temporal and ideological shifts in South African cultural production during this period, and to the two major phases of black writing (the Sophiatown and District Six writers of the 50s, and the *Staffrider* writers of the 70s and 80s). The work of these writers is not, however, subsumed into a political meta-narrative. In particular, this study resists the tendency to lump the work of black writers into one large, undifferentiated category (“protest writing” or “spectacular” representation). This approach has had the effect of flattening out or homogenising a body of work that is much more varied and interesting than many critical accounts would suggest. Finally, the contribution of three writers of the “interregnum” (Ndebele, Matlou, Wicomb) is explored. What is of particular interest is their break from established conventions of representation: their work reveals a willingness to resist over-simplification, to experiment, and to explore issues of identity and gender. By examining these texts from the vantage point of the post-apartheid present, one is able to arrive at an enhanced understanding of the form that black writing took under apartheid, and the pressures to which it was responding.

OPSOMMING

Hierdie studie onderneem ‘n her-lesing en herevaluering van die werk van swart Suid-Afrikaanse kortverhaalskrywers – vanaf R.R.R.Dhlomo (*circa* 1930) tot Zoë Wicomb (aan die einde van die 1980s). Die kortverhaal, tesame met die outobiografie, was die dominante genre van swart skryfkuns gedurende hierdie tydperk. Die redes hiervoor word in die tesis ondersoek, sowel as die maniere waarop swart skrywers hierdie familiêre literêre genre aangepas of hervorm het. Die titel – “Writing Black” – verwys na welbekende werke deur Richard Rive (*Writing Black*) en J.M. Coetzee (*White Writing*) – en stel die kwessies van ras en ras-beïnvloede identiteit voorop. Terwyl ‘n navorser nie ander faktore (bv. klas; geslag) wil afskeep nie, is dit skaars moontlik om die impak van rasseklassifikasie gedurende die apartheid-era te oorskat. Desnieteenstaande is dit duidelik dat die idee van ‘n ongedifferensieerde “swart” identiteit nie ‘n akademies haalbare aanspraak is nie.

Die vertrekpunt wat hier gebruik word reflekteer die vereistes om die individualiteit van sekere tekste (hul “letterkundigheid”) sowel as hul verbondenheid tot ‘n spesifieke plek en tyd (d.w.s. hul “wêreldsheid” of “omstandigheidsoorsprong”) te erken. Literêre tekste is komplekse verbale artefakte van ‘n ongewone aard, maar kan nogtans nie losgemaak word van hul kontekste van produksie en ontvangs nie; swart skrywers van Suid-Afrika se werk sou grotendeels onverstaanbaar gewees het indien hierdie faktore nie in ag geneem sou word nie. Versigtige aandag word in die studie gegee aan die herkenbare ruimtelike, temporale en ideologiese verskuiwings in Suid-Afrikaanse kulturele produksie gedurende hierdie tydperk, asook aan die belangrikste fases van swart skryfwerk (die Sophiatown- en Distrik Ses-skrywers van vyftigerjare en die *Staffrider* skrywers van die sewentigs en tagtigs). Die werk van hierdie skrywers word nogtans nie onderwerp aan ‘n politieke meta-narratief nie. Die neiging om die werk van swart skrywers as een groot, ongedifferensieerde kategorie (bv. protes-skrywing of spektakulêre uitbeelding) saam te gooi, word spesifiek teengestaan in hierdie tesis. So ‘n benadering het die effek van verplating of homogenisering van ‘n skryfgebied wat veel meer gedifferensieerd en interessant is as wat menige kritici se beskrywings suggereer. Laastens word die bydraes van die skrywers van die “oorgangstydperk” (Ndebele, Matlou, Wicomb) ondersoek. Wat veral interessant is, is hoe hulle wegbreek van konvensies van uitbeelding: hul werk

vertoon hul bereidwilligheid om oorvereenvoudiging te weerstaan, te eksperimenteer, en om identiteits- en gender-kwessies te ondersoek. Deur hierdie tekste vanuit die perspektief van die post-apartheid hede te benader, kan die studie 'n beter begrip vorm van die vorme wat swart skryfwerk onder apartheid aangeneem het, sowel as van die kragte waarteen dit gereageer het.

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This study is a product of my work over a number of years in this research field. I offer an Honours course, entitled “From Sophiatown to Soweto”, and the responses and input of postgraduate students to this course have also been a valuable stimulus.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to explore the achievements of a number of black writers whose work has contributed significantly to the recent (post-1948) literature of this country. One of the strongest genres of black writing is the short story (for reasons that will be explored) and by viewing these texts from the vantage point of the post-apartheid present, one may be able to arrive at a better understanding of the form that black writing took under apartheid, and the kinds of pressures to which it was responding. The study will explore the way social, political and ideological as well as literary factors have helped shape the form, content and style of the short story. While other critics have studied particular phases of the development of the short story genre, or have discussed black (South African) writing across the various genres, none has attempted a study of the kind and scope envisaged here. 1948 marks the date of the election of the National Party government under Dr D.F. Malan with a mandate to implement the policy of apartheid, while February 1990 marks President de Klerk's historic decision to release Nelson Mandela and the other political prisoners, unban the ANC, the PAC and the SACP, and enter into negotiations. It thus marks the point of no return, the date at which a transition to democracy became inevitable. These two dates therefore define the parameters of the apartheid era: inevitably, then, a central focus of this study is the impact of apartheid on black culture and writing in South Africa.¹

Given the virtual implosion of "English studies" over the last thirty or so years, anyone embarking on a project such as this can take little for granted. In particular, one cannot assume agreement even on such a fundamental matter as the meaning or appropriate use of the terms "literary" or "literature". Nor can one assume any self-evident justification for a study which selects literary texts as its focus. As Wade points out,

The category of literature has in recent decades been vigorously disrupted by a host of literary theories more concerned with retrieving

¹ Once the study was underway I decided (for reasons that will become clear) to include a chapter on the work of R.R.R. Dhlomo, whose short stories date from about 1930, and who is the most important precursor of the *Drum* writers of the 1950s.

its denigrated exclusions – popular culture, marginal writings of many kinds, orature and so on – and with revealing the ideological assumptions implicated in the formations of literary canons. (6)

One must acknowledge at the outset the impossibility of arriving at any single or generally agreed definition for the terms “literary” or “literature”. This is, as Docherty puts it, “a search doomed to failure” (126-127); attempts to define or contest the terms frequently turn out to be forms of special pleading for a particular approach to literature. Perhaps the most that can be said is that there is a category, “literature”, which, as it is commonly used, includes, typically, creative or imaginative writing or works of fiction. (These terms are themselves, of course, problematic.) What follows is an explanation of my own understanding and use of the term “literature”, and an attempt to situate this in the context of literary studies in South Africa.

One way of characterising “literary” texts is to draw attention to what is undoubtedly one of their most unusual features – their fictionality. This is of course one of the oldest ways of characterising literature: although Aristotle and Plato arrive at opposite estimations of the status or value of mimetic (or fictional) works, they both recognise the peculiar status of fictional stories. Such stories (or texts) refer not to things which have happened, or to actual or historical persons, but to things which may happen, or to invented characters (hence the ambiguity of the Greek term for fiction, *pseudos*, which can refer both to “lies” and to “invented stories”). Fictionality entails the notion of invention, and this explains the subsequent attribution of creativity or “imagination” to such works. Drawing on Searle’s speech act theory, J. Hillis Miller talks about literature as “performative utterance” – a way of doing things with words: “Every sentence in a literary work is part of a chain of performative utterances opening out more and more of an imaginary realm initiated in the first sentence” (38). It requires the active participation of the reader to actualise or realise the virtual world created by the words – and this in turn entails a willingness to suspend disbelief.

Many of the characteristics that have been attributed to literary works are in fact linked to the idea of fictionality. Clearly, a fictional work is not subject to ordinary tests of verifiability. Because it is fictional, it is also singular and unique, and its “singularity” is often emphasised in recent theoretical discussion of “the literary”. A good example is Attridge’s discussion of the topic: “At the heart of what I have called the peculiar potency of literature . . . is its inseparability from two properties,

which we may call, without too much violence to normal usage, *singularity* and *inventiveness*” (“Singular Events: Literature, Invention, and Performance” 49-50). However, a literary text is also characterised by “exemplarity”: while it works through the concrete and the particular, its characters and events are not tied to particular referents in the real world, and so they are able to signify in a more general way. As Culler reminds us, one term for this is “the concrete universal”, a concept which captures “that special combination of particularity and generality that enables Hamlet, for instance, to be more than a merely actual person” (“The Literary in Theory” 280). This helps to explain claims have often been made for literature, originating in Aristotle’s statement about “poetic truth” in the *Poetics*.² In Culler’s words, “The structure of literary works is such that it is easier to take them as telling us about the human condition in general than to specify some narrower category they describe or illuminate” (282). What, for example, is *Hamlet* (the play) about? What is *Waiting for the Barbarians* about? Any number of possible or plausible answers could be and have been given; the only certainty is that no answer can be final.

Another way of explaining this feature of literary texts is to say that their meaning is not bound by a particular communicative context. According to Scholes, in everyday acts of communication “a neutral, unliterary context is present, phenomenal and concrete. That is, the context is present to both sender and receiver of a given message” (156). An example would be where two people are both present in a room, looking through a window, and one says, “It is raining.” Here there is little room for doubt or ambiguity. If one were to read the same sentence in a novel, the meaning would be quite different: “It is raining not in present reality but in a space we have learned to call fictional” (156). This helps to explain why literary works are endlessly open to interpretation, and why readers who are situated differently in space or time cannot help but reread and reinterpret them.

It follows that one should question attempts to reduce the category of “literature” to refer simply to “an unwarranted, elitist privileging of certain modes of discourse” (Culler 280). It is easy to demonstrate that the term “literature” is culturally produced, and that it has meant different things at different times – but it is not necessary to concede (Stanley Fish notwithstanding)³ that virtually any text could

² “Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular” (68).

³ I am thinking in particular of his chapter, “How to Recognise a Poem when You See One” (322-37).

be regarded as literary. One can agree with Eagleton's ringing declaration: "Literature, in the sense of a set of works of assured and unalterable value, distinguished by certain shared inherent qualities, does not exist" (11); one can accept his claim that "there is no such thing as a literary work or tradition that is valuable *in itself*, regardless of what anyone might have said or come to say about it" (11) – but this does not mean that one has to abandon entirely the category of "literature" (in the sense I have tried to outline above). While "literature" may not consist of "a set of works of assured and unalterable value", literary texts do possess (to use Attridge's phrase) "a peculiar potency"; for a variety of reasons, they will continue to fascinate and challenge us.

CONTEXT

If this study is informed by a literary interest, this does not and cannot exclude an interest in "context". Any attempt to isolate texts from their context (either of production or reception) is at best misconceived, at worst futile. Literary texts may be transhistorical, but this does not mean that they exist in some ahistorical, apolitical, aesthetic realm, uncontaminated by worldly issues and concerns. While the meaning of a literary work may not be determined or limited by its context, it is clear that literary works are intimately related to their context, however one conceives of that context. One of the problems facing any contextual approach to literature is that the context of a literary text is potentially infinite: it could include its linguistic, discursive, historical, social, political, cultural, biographical, psychological and ideological contexts. This clearly poses enormous problems: how does one determine what aspects of context are relevant or helpful in a particular case? Culler sums this up in the following paradox: "Meaning is context-bound, but context is boundless" (*Literary Theory* 67). In other words, "context" is not self-evident: an act of critical judgement on the part of the reader is required.

It is also difficult to separate "text" from "context". Contextual influences help to define both the form and the subject matter of literary texts. Context is in fact inscribed in a text by virtue of its medium, language, and by the circumstances and nature of the text's performance and/or publication. This is, in part, what Said means by the "worldliness" or "circumstantiality" of a text (*The World, The Text and the Critic* 39). Moreover the text itself constructs an implied audience (which may or may not resemble its actual audience), and this is part of one's reading experience. And

where and how does one draw a dividing line between *literary* context (in the form of conventions, traditions, codes, forms, expectations, intertexts) and other kinds of context?

Whatever else they may be, however, literary texts are social and cultural products. One's understanding of such texts can only be enhanced by studies which seek to show how these texts are written, read, distributed and exchanged. This is particularly the case in South Africa, where contextual or extra-textual factors have played a decisive role in determining the characteristics and even the *very possibility* of black writing in English. One needs, then, to balance a respect for the relative autonomy of literary texts with an awareness of the ways they are, as Haslett puts it, "implicated within society" (166) – inevitably products of their place and time. As Said reminds us, texts not only exist in the world, they intervene in the world: "My position is that texts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted" (*The World, the Text and the Critic* 4). This perspective informs this study of black writing. In Hazlitt's terms, the challenge is how to balance "contextual imperative with interpretive and textual specificity" (168). For Cunningham, the challenge is to prevent the text from being "utterly subsumed into [its] context" 76).⁴ For Said, "worldliness" is necessarily and inescapably inscribed in a text, and the critic's own situation in the world governs his reception of the text.

Decisions about context directly influenced by the particular critic's theoretical approach. Writing from a marxist perspective,⁵ Haslett shows a healthy awareness of the problems attached to any attempt to simply "apply" theory to particular texts: "Applications [of theory] often raise as many questions as they seek to answer. Those theoretical approaches which find in the text what they were looking for are merely self-validating" (166). This study is also informed by a suspicion of what one might call "strong theory", on the grounds that it often predetermines its results. The outcome is often an insensitivity to the texts that are supposedly the centre of interest. Any theory that reduces the literary text to the status of a model is

⁴ Cunningham is criticising the New Historicist tendency to displace attention from the literary text to its (textual) context: "Texts are acknowledged as sites of meaning, only to be practically circumnavigated. They become places for the immediate displacement of attention elsewhere, for the instant relocating of the reading effort" (75). He comments in particular on Greenblatt's treatment of *Twelfth Night*.

unlikely to do justice to the text's singularity. Similarly, any "symptomatic reading" – which treats the text as a sign or symptom of something else – is likely to be reductive.⁶ This is particularly true of approaches which foreground social, cultural, political or psychological issues. As Culler puts it, such approaches give rise to "particular types of interpretation in which texts are mapped into a target language" (*Literary Theory* 65). This does not of course mean that one should take texts at face value, and clearly there is no reading of a text that is not informed (at least implicitly) by theory. It does, however, suggest the need to recognise that literary texts are complex verbal constructions of an unusual kind, and that they are likely to elude final definition.

LITERARY STUDIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Post-Kantian Western aesthetics tends to emphasise the autonomy of the work of art, and to focus on its structure and effect as an aesthetic object. This approach, with its valorisation of "impersonality" (of the artist) and "objectivity" (of the critic), found its clearest expression in the work of the American "New Critics". Bourdieu sums this up this non-utilitarian approach to art or literature as follows:

The multiple responses that philosophers, linguists, semiologists and art historians have given to the question of the specificity of literature ("literariness"), poetry ("poeticity") or the work of art in general, and to the question of the properly aesthetic perception they call for, all concur in stressing the properties of gratuity, the absence of function, the primacy of form over function, disinterestedness, and so on. (285)⁷

This approach – together with its English (Leavisite) variants – constituted a powerful critical orthodoxy which held almost unrivalled sway in English departments in South Africa until the early 1970s. This formalist approach, allied to a humanist commitment to the values that the study of literature was supposed to cultivate, helped to create a climate in which works of South African literature were often regarded with suspicion as "colonial" or "provincial" or "second-rate" – or else simply ignored. During my undergraduate studies at Natal University in the mid-to-late 1960s, for

⁵ She prefers the small "m".

⁶ Culler offers a brief but lucid discussion of these points (*Literary Theory* 67-69).

⁷ I am indebted to Wolfreys (*Critical Keywords* 137) for this reference.

example, South African literature was (apart from one or two poems) entirely absent from the syllabus, and works by black writers seemed not to exist.

Since literature depends for its very existence on its recognition and reception by publishers and readers, and since the academy, and, more generally, the views of publishers, critics, and educators, are a powerful influence on its reception, it seems worthwhile to pause and look briefly at the kind of resistance that South African writing – and more particularly black South African writing – encountered during the period of this study. The second conference of the English Academy of South Africa, held at Rhodes University in 1969, can be taken as representative of the state of the discipline at that point in time.⁸ In his opening address (“The Purpose of the Conference”) Butler dwelt on the crisis of identity allegedly experienced by many English-speaking South Africans: “They feel a lack of purpose or direction; they feel they want to belong, and they are afraid of belonging: they don’t know what to belong to” (11).⁹ Butler went on to discuss the reception of South African literature in English, and asked the question, “At what point does a body of writing become a literature?” (12). One hundred and fifty million people living on the American continent, he argued, might eventually produce “a body of writing . . . which one could dignify with the title Literature. But one hundred and fifty thousand scattered, heterogeneous English-speakers in a multi-lingual, multi-racial society of sixteen million, can they produce a literature: Ought they to try?” (13). Butler goes on to identify “Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens, Conrad, James, Yeats, Eliot” as constituting “the great central tradition, profoundly humane, infinitely rich and varied” – alongside which it might seem “irresponsible to waste brain power and time on something so small and peripheral [as English-speaking South African literature]” (13). On what grounds, he asks, do we insert “a second-rate South African work in our set-book lists at the expense of an acknowledged masterpiece?” (13). Butler was himself, of course, a leading South African poet and playwright, and he is to some extent playing devil’s advocate. He nevertheless finds himself in something of a dilemma: wanting on the one hand to affirm the cultural and creative possibilities open to writers in South Africa, while at the same time hesitant to claim for their works a place in the university syllabus. Other participants at the conference were less hopeful or more

⁸ Those attending the conference would almost certainly have been white academics, and it is doubtful that many of them will have seen this as a possible cause for concern.

inflexible: Segal, in his paper entitled “The Place of South African Writing in the University”, found that it should have no place at all – at least, not as South African literature. He does not recognise any crisis of identity among English-speaking South Africans – “Mentally and spiritually we live and breathe every moment of our lives in the atmosphere of Western culture” – and he asserts that in fact “the Old Testament, the New Testament, *King Lear* are, from this point of view, just as South African and just as contemporary as Athol Fugard’s latest play” (176-77). The following extract, with its reference to Arnold, makes explicit the assumptions underpinning this critical orthodoxy:

An English course is, of course, an introduction, not only to history but also to aesthetic experience, to the classics which are classics because they are “inexhaustible to contemplation”, because one is always finding in them some new aspect of structure, feeling and thought, however many times one has read them, because they constitute touchstones of excellence and help us to know ourselves and make ourselves. (178)

Given these views, there could be little incentive to introduce new or specifically South African works into the syllabus – and it is not difficult to see why black writers might be overlooked entirely.

A further example is the paper by Sands, “The South African Novel: Some Observations”. Taking his bearings from Dr Johnson (“length of duration and continuance of esteem” (89)), Sands is at pains to guard himself against the accusation of “*sub*-provincialism” (his emphasis). “It would seem right”, he says, “to identify the English South African novel as a minor tradition within the novel in English”, and he goes on to list his “three hostages to fortune” – Olive Schreiner, Pauline Smith and Alan Paton (90). Instead of considering them as *South African* writers (and looking at them in relation to their social and cultural context), he goes on to compare their novels (unfavourably) with those of George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte and Charles Dickens (the basis for comparison being their alleged thematic similarities). Again echoing Arnold, he justifies his procedure as follows: “Our best service to English and its literature is to try to discern the best in it, and put it to social and individual use” (92). It is taken as axiomatic that the task of the literary critic was to discriminate – on

⁹ Papers given at the conference were subsequently published in *English Studies in Africa*, Volume 13 (1970).

the basis of literary quality (“the best”). Sands goes on to observe that while the conference gave reason to hope that it might be possible to nurture in South Africa “a sufficient ‘responsive community of minds’” (the reference this time is to Leavis), South African writers nevertheless needed to “direct themselves to the overseas audience” (93) – the implication being that this is how “quality” is measured and “serious critical standards” maintained (93). Apart from a passing reference to Noni Jabavu and to Mphahlele’s MA thesis, African writers do not feature in his survey. There is no mention of Sol Plaatje, or H.I.E. Dhlomo, or of the *Drum* writers of the 1950s, or of the District Six writers (Rive, La Guma, Matthews), and no mention of the crippling effects of banning, exile and political repression. It is perhaps not surprising that when a new generation of black poets (Mtshali, Serote, Sepamla, Gwala) started to publish in the late 60s and early 70s, their work was initially patronised or treated with some degree of incomprehension.¹⁰

In the course of the 1970s a younger generation of South African academics attacked the prevailing orthodoxy as revealing an elitist and colonialist dependence on the literature and traditions of Great Britain, and a reluctance to admit the realities and challenges of our time and place. (Here they were echoing charges originally made by Butler at the first English Academy conference in 1956, and quoted by Sands in his paper.) Many of these younger critics were sensitive to the growing black political challenge to the apartheid state, aware of developments in black writing, and critical of the insular and stultifying effect (given the South African context) of more traditional approaches to literature. Writing from a Marxist or cultural materialist position, these critics sought to understand South African literary production in relation to its social and cultural context. A handful of critics in fact succeeded in capturing the intellectual and moral high ground, and managed to bring about something of a paradigm shift in the field of English studies in South Africa. One result was to bring to light the work of early black Southern African writers (Mofolo, Plaatje, the Dhlomo brothers) and to focus attention on neglected traditions or areas of writing (for example, *Drum* writing, the oral tradition). An important vehicle for much of the early work on South African literature was the journal *English in Africa*,

¹⁰ I discuss this in more detail in an article in *Scrutiny* 2 in 2000, where I look in particular at the initial reaction to Mtshali’s *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* (1971). The critical debate in the pages of *Contrast*, provoked by an article by A.G. Ulyatt in 1977, is quite well known. Ulyatt concludes that this is “a poetry of resentment . . . characterised by its immaturity”, and asks critics not to lose sight of “established critical standards” (60-61).

established in Grahamstown in 1974. Among the critics to contribute significantly to this transformation were Tim Couzens, Stephen Gray, Isabel Hofmeyr, Michael Vaughan, Kelwyn Sole, Gareth Cornwell and Nick Visser, and I would like to acknowledge a collective debt of gratitude to them: my own approach to literary studies and my own research interests have been influenced by their critical interventions. In addition, I am of course indebted to the important critical work of black writers themselves, in particular Es'kia Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi and Njabulo Ndebele.

While this is not the place to examine in any detail the contributions of the critics listed above, two landmarks stand out. One was Stephen Gray's *Southern African Literature: An Introduction* (1979), which brought a new rigour and breadth of interest to the study of Southern African literature. Another was the publication of a special edition of the journal *Critical Arts* in 1984, with the title "English Studies in Transition". In his introduction Visser explains that the special issue "arises out of a protracted and often acrimonious debate that has engaged South African departments of English for over a decade" (1). The contributions to the journal signal the introduction of new perspectives and a new critical discourse into the field of English studies in this country. In his article, Vaughan concludes his assault on "the dominant ideas in Departments of English" with this call:

What we need, then, is to free ourselves of the shackles of outmoded literary concepts and practices. . . . This implies a reversal of the present priorities: from universalism and timelessness to the here and the now; from the West to Africa and the Third World; from academic elitism to more reciprocal relations with writers and writers' groups . . . from a concentration upon the immanence of the text to one upon the material conditions of the production and reception of literature; from consumerism to activism; from non-politicism to politicisation
(49)

The intensity of the assault is no doubt a measure of the difficulty of altering ideas and values that had long seemed axiomatic and were often held as articles of faith. The result was to create a more conducive climate for the reception of South African literature, and in particular, writing by black South Africans.

AIMS AND SCOPE

The study tracks what is seen as a series of fundamental shifts in black writing (and politics) in the period from 1930 to 1990. These shifts are in part temporal (from the inception of apartheid to its dissolution), in part spatial (from Sophiatown to Soweto, from the inner-city ghetto to the apartheid-era township) and in part ideological (from non-racialism to black consciousness, from protest to resistance). One indicator of these shifts is the stark contrast between the two publications which more than any other helped to popularise the short story among a black urban audience in South Africa: *Drum* (associated with Sophiatown and the 1950s) and *Staffrider* (associated with Soweto, Black Consciousness and the 1970s and 80s). This outline is, of course, over-schematic, but by taking the whole period as one's field of study one is able to identify trends, make comparisons and gain insights that might not otherwise be apparent. The fact that one is writing from the very different vantage point of "the new South Africa" (in the year 2007) means that one also has the benefit of hindsight: one can no longer read these texts as one did when they were first published, and this brings into play two different "horizons" of reception and expectation.

While this study is indebted to earlier studies of black writing in South Africa, it also differs from them in important respects. Willan and Couzens focus on particular authors (Plaatje and H.I.E. Dhlomo) who represent an earlier generation of black writers). Rabkin and van Dyk both focus on *Drum* writing, while Barnett and Shava attempt cross-genre surveys of an extended period of black writing. Trump's doctoral dissertation is a comparative study of short stories in English and Afrikaans, and is now somewhat dated. More recently, Jane Watts has looked at ideological shifts in black writing, but she does not focus on the short story. Ndebele's collection of essays, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, combines both literary and cultural criticism, but does not attempt any detailed or systematic exploration of the short story genre. More recently De Kock and Attwell have published studies which adopt the insights and perspectives of postcolonial criticism. The terrain covered by De Kock's *Civilising Barbarians* (1996) predates the period of this study; its focus is indicated by the sub-title, "Missionary Narrative and African Textual Response in Nineteenth-Century South Africa". Attwell's *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History* (2005) partly overlaps with the period of this study, but does

not have the same genre-specific focus. It does raise issues which are relevant to the present study, and provides valuable insights.

A particular aim of this study is to interrogate the often over-simple claims that have been made for or about black writing in South Africa (and the short story in particular). One of the “truisms” about black writing – at least since the late 1960s – has been that this writing is inescapably “political” and oppositional. In Attwell’s words, “The predominant mode, it is said, is the literature of witness, documentary and protest” – a mode which inevitably leads to “varieties of realism” and militates against what he calls “experimentalism” (169, 175). In my view writing by black South Africans is more interesting and more various than most accounts suggest. The detailed readings of the work of particular writers will test some of the often sweeping claims that have been made about black writing, and look at the impact of politics and ideology on the form and style (as well as the substance) of these stories. Among the factors that have directly influenced both the production and reception of this literature are the presence or absence of publishing opportunities, the implied or effective audience, and the effect of political repression (in particular, censorship, banning and exile).

One of the achievements of black writers of the short story has been to articulate the emergence of a black urban presence and identity in South Africa. Among the questions to be explored are the ways in which individual and communal experience is represented, and the evidence for the continuing influence of indigenous cultural traditions and values. What, in particular, is the impact of the Black Consciousness movement on cultural production in the 1970s and 1980s? Is this a male-dominated tradition of writing? To what extent are issues of gender occluded? What are the implications of the fact that most of these writers work within the conventions of literary realism? One reason for focussing on the short story in particular is its relative “popularity” or accessibility. How important and influential were publications such as *Drum* and *Staffrider*, and what were their respective agendas? To what extent do oral traditions of storytelling continue to exert an influence on modern urban writers using English rather than one of the indigenous languages? What are the literary and ideological implications of their use of English?

WRITING BLACK

One needs to state the obvious, that the use of the term “black” does not in any way imply an endorsement or perpetuation of the racial categories of apartheid. Van Zyl points out that “during the apartheid years the literatures in the different languages were institutionalised as disconnected fields of studies with separate literary histories” (33), and one would not want to support this practice. The focus on black writing is not intended to “ghettoise” such writing: the different elements of that complex configuration which constitutes the whole field of literature in South Africa should (ideally) not be examined separately or in isolation from each other. Titlestad’s comments on the category “white writing” obviously apply just as much to the category “black writing”: “We need to be apprehensive of the category of ‘white writing’ in that it re-inscribes the racial essentialisation (sic) we have attempted to unravel. We cannot, however, in a divided society that returns obsessively the representational seam (that seam of suturing the self to the Other) dispense with the category” (111).

The focus on black writing is also a strategic necessity: the contribution of these writers to our literature is still not sufficiently recognised, and one must acknowledge that the conditions under which they wrote were very different from those experienced by their enfranchised white counterparts. In a field of study (“South African literature in English”) which is already beset by sweeping and generalised statements, some narrowing of focus is a practical necessity – the gains, it is hoped, outweigh the losses. This study is emphatically *not* intended to be a survey – even of its defined field. Other studies have surveyed at least part of the field, and of course Michael Chapman takes the development of Southern African literatures from their inception to the present as the subject of his comprehensive study (*Southern African Literatures* 1996). I explore the work of writers whose contribution is recognised (sometimes by common critical consent) to be significant, or writers whose intervention has significantly altered the field of black writing and its reception.

One reason for limiting the scope of this study is the difficulty of demonstrating the existence of a body of writing that one can in fact call “South African literature” – given the multiplicity of languages and cultures and the divisions and inequalities created by three centuries of colonial oppression and four decades of apartheid rule. As a political entity “South Africa” is a relatively recent invention, and the conditions for the creation of an inclusive, democratic South Africa only begin

with the 1994 election and the new constitutional dispensation. In his introduction to a special edition of *Poetics Today* (2001), de Kock acknowledges that writers attempting studies of South African literature “apologise for attempting the impossible and then go ahead anyway” (263). He argues that even to talk of the “field” of South African literary studies is problematic:

Literary “fields” – entities, groupings – require some reason other than the mere convenience of geography for their existence: they need minimal convergence in the domains of origin, language, culture, history, and nationalism (contested or not) to become, in some sense, cohesive and inter-referential. But in the South African case each of these domains fragments into heterogeneity the moment one looks more closely at the literary objects at hand. (263-64).

According to Van Wyk Smith, when one reads through anthologies or compilations of Southern African literature, “one is struck by the remarkable extent to which South Africa’s literatures have grown up in isolation” (74). There is, he argues, “preciously little evidence in South African writing of significant intertextuality across cultural, ethnic and linguistic divides” (81). Nkosi argues that “the very concept of a single, unified practice which might bear the name of ‘South African literature’ without embarrassment is extremely problematical” (“Constructing the ‘Cross-Border’ Reader” 44). He argues elsewhere that “there exists an unhealed – I will not say incurable – split between white and black writing, between on the one hand an urgent need to document and to bear witness and on the other the capacity to go on furlough, to loiter, and to experiment” (“Postmodernism and Black Writing in South Africa” 75). Even in the case of the more limited - and therefore, presumably, more cohesive - field which is the subject of this study, the degree of disruption makes the existence of anything like a tradition of black writing problematic. There is no doubt that some kind of commonality – deriving from historical and cultural interaction over an extended period - does exist between South Africans, and there is no intention to perpetuate the literary and cultural divides of the past. The advantages of a sustained focus on a more or less discrete (or at least identifiable) body of writing seem to justify the present undertaking. The hope is that this study will contribute in some measure to an enhanced appreciation of contribution of black writers to our literary culture.

A particular dilemma relates to the unwarranted exclusion of short story writers of Indian descent for the purposes of this study. Many of these writers would have regarded themselves as “black” – partly as a consequence of the more inclusive definition of this term popularised by the Black Consciousness movement, whose leaders in the 1970s included political activists such as Strini Moodley and Saths Cooper.¹¹ The decision – made very reluctantly – to exclude them from the study in no way implies that their writings are not as deserving of consideration as those of their fellow black writers. I have benefited greatly from exposure to the work of writers such as Ahmed Essop, Achmat Dangor, Agnes Sam, Ronnie Govender, Deena Padayachee, Rayda Jacobs and Farida Karodia (among others), and have often included them in courses I have taught over the last ten or more years. The reasons for their exclusion here are simply pragmatic (to do with considerations of space). I also recognise the specificity of their particular cultural situation: the communities to which they belong retain strong linguistic, cultural and religious ties with the Indian sub-continent. The work of these writers could in fact be examined as part of the literature of an Indian or South Asian diaspora. In addition, most of these writers only started publishing towards the end of the period under consideration (Essop is a notable exception), and some of them (Sam, Jacobs, Karodia) spent a large part of their adult lives in exile. Govender’s contribution has until recently been primarily as a dramatist and theatre practitioner: his prize-winning collection of stories, *At the Edge*, was only published in 1996. Nevertheless the inclusion of some of these writers would have enriched this study, and broadened one’s understanding of the development of black writing in this country.

In apparently “privileging” the category of “race” (“Writing Black”), one is recognising the extent to which identity in apartheid South Africa was defined in racial terms: a person’s racial classification determined almost everything about his or her circumstances and life opportunities. One was, almost necessarily, a racialised subject. Biko makes what is perhaps the definitive statement:

¹¹ It is important to note that the blanket term “black” can be misleading in that it conceals the existence of differences or inequalities among those so designated. Those classified “Indian” or “Coloured” did not have to carry passes, and were in various ways relatively privileged. The Western Cape, for example, was a coloured labour preference area, and a determined effort was made to exclude blacks who came from the Eastern Cape seeking work. The legacy of this policy is still evident in the complex racial politics of the Western Cape. These tensions are often evident in the work of black writers themselves.

Born shortly before 1948, I have lived all my conscious life in the framework of institutionalised separate development. My friendships, my love, my education, my thinking and every other facet of my life have been carved and shaped within the context of separate development.

(“We Blacks” 27)¹²

This is not to negate the importance of other socio-economics determinants, such as class or gender, but in apartheid South Africa race and class often coincided, so that to be black was, almost inevitably, to be poor and working class. “Is apartheid about segregation of blacks or segregation of the poor?” asks J.M. Coetzee (“Into the Dark Chamber” 361). “Perhaps not an important question, when blacks and the poor are so nearly the same.” This does not necessarily hold for black writers, who are more likely to come from relatively privileged backgrounds, but whatever their personal circumstances they were consigned to live in the apartheid ghetto and subject to exactly the same laws as any other black person in South Africa. “Race” may be “a figment of our collective, cultural imagination” (Niro 2), but it is hardly possible to underestimate its impact on South African society: ours is (or was) a society permeated by the ideology of race and divided at every level and in every way along racial (and ethnic) lines. Apartheid was one of the twentieth century’s more horrifying feats of social engineering, and the implications for the writer of living in a divided society were profound. There was no aspect of life, however “private”, into which the tentacles of the state did not reach. Gordimer suggests that while writers everywhere are shaped by their own particular society,

there is no country in the western world where the daily enactment of law reflects politics as intimately and blatantly as in South Africa. There is no country in the western world where the creative imagination, whatever it seizes upon, finds the focus of even the most private event set in the overall social determination of racial laws” (“English-Language Literature and Politics” 100).¹³

¹² “We Blacks” was originally a column written under the pseudonym “Frank Talk” for the August 1970 *SASO Newsletter*. Unless otherwise stated, quotations from Biko’s writings are taken from the collection edited by Aelred Stubbs, *I Write What I Like* (1978).

¹³ One should remember that one of the first acts to be introduced by the apartheid authorities was the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949), which made inter-racial marriage illegal. The Immorality Amendment Act (1957) made sexual intercourse between whites and members of other racial groups illegal. In this way the state regulated who one might fall in love with, or make love to, and who one might marry. (*The Apartheid Handbook* 26)

She points to some of the consequences for the writer:

To return to the situation in which all South African writers find themselves. Black or white, writing in English, Afrikaans, Sesuto, Zulu, even if he (*sic*) successfully shoots the rapids of bannings and/or exile, any writer's attempt to present in South Africa a totality of human experience within his own country is subverted before he sets down a word. As a white man, his fortune may change; the one thing he cannot experience is blackness – with all that implies in South Africa. As a black man, the one thing he cannot experience is whiteness – with all that implies. . . . The indivisible class-colour barrier is much, much more effective, from the point of view of limiting the writer's intimate knowledge of his society, than any class barrier has ever been.

(“English-Language Literature and Politics” 118)

This may seem overly pessimistic: Gordimer has of course had close and extensive contact with black South African writers, beginning with the *Drum* writers in the 1950s, and her own fictional achievements (she is the winner of both the Booker Prize and the Nobel Prize for literature) would suggest that however problematic or limiting her situation as a privileged white writer, she has not allowed this to cripple her creativity. Her career can be seen as an attempt to write herself out of the racial identity and privilege ascribed to her under apartheid.¹⁴

Gordimer's views, expressed in this essay dating from the mid-seventies, are echoed by Oswald Mtshali, writing at almost the same time. In his essay, “Black Poetry in South Africa: What it Means”, Mtshali sketches the life experiences of an invented character, the ironically named Jabulani Moya,¹⁵ who from the time of his birth in a segregated hospital to the time of his burial in a segregated cemetery, finds himself thwarted at every turn by the racial legislation that governs the lives of black South Africans. He speculates about what would happen should Jabulani turn his hand (however unlikely this might seem) to poetry:

His poetry will depict his life and the people around him. It will describe stokvels, shebeens, police vans, prisons, churches, hospitals, trains, murders, rapes, robberies, night vigils and funerals – in short, all aspects of a black man's life. (122)¹⁶

¹⁴ Whether or not she has succeeded is a matter for critical debate. It is useful to contrast Stephen Clingman's largely sympathetic study with Kathrin Wagner's sharply critical one.

¹⁵ “Jabulani” means “we are happy”.

¹⁶ Ironically, this grim list suggests how little the circumstances of the lives of many black South Africans have been altered by ten years of democratic, non-racial rule under an ANC-led government.

The form and substance of black writing, whether in poetry or prose, will inevitably reflect the lived realities of life in the apartheid ghetto. This writing will inevitably differ, in form and style and substance, from that produced by white writers. Even someone as resolutely committed to non-racialism as Richard Rive was obliged to recognise the effect of what he called “group polarisation”: writing in the early 1980s, he confesses that he has been “forced into the position of having to call [himself] a black writer” (“The Black Writer in South Africa” 92):

I see black as politico-economic rather than ethnic. When I call a literature “black” I imply that that literature emanates from a people who are unenfranchised and discriminated against because of the colour of their skins. Such a literature must differ in texture and quality from that emanating from a people who have the vote, suffer no discrimination and are in a power position because of the colour of their skins. If this were not so, it would imply that external forces play hardly any part in the moulding of creativity (92)

We live in and are shaped by society, and the brute realities of apartheid society inevitably helped to form the consciousness of the artist, whatever his or her particular position. As Gordimer reminds us, “It is at the widest level of the formation of our society itself . . . that the external power of society enters the breast and brain of the artist and determines the nature and state of art” (“Relevance and Commitment” 135). While it may have been possible, in the very different conditions obtaining in Western Europe in the era of modernism, to conceive of the artist as a self-consecrated being, set apart from society, pursuing his or her art in lonely isolation, this is clearly impossible in the South African situation. For Mbulelo Mzamane (writing in 1988), “A writer [in South Africa] is unimportant, irrelevant and probably alienated unless he is political” (“Literature and Politics” 42). A central aim of this study, then, is to explore the relationship between the (black) writer and society in South Africa under apartheid, and to look at the different forms that this writing took.

My own use of the term “black” resembles that of Rive’s in the quotation above, and my title also echoes the title of his autobiography, *Writing Black* (1981). It also reflects the title of J.M. Coetzee’s collection of essays, *White Writing* (1988). If “white writing” is the writing “generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African” (Coetzee 11), then black writing is writing generated by the concerns of those who are disenfranchised, subject to oppressive and

discriminatory laws, and made to feel outcasts in the land of their birth. Attwell adds an important rider: “If white writing emerges from a place of instability, tension and negotiation – in this instance, between the self and Africa – is there an equivalently unstable place in black discourse? The answer is yes” (*Rewriting Modernity* 16).¹⁷ The issue of a “black” identity will recur throughout this study, but the working premise is that there can be no such thing as a unified or homogeneous black identity. Gilroy has questioned the claims of cultural nationalists and pointed to the historical processes of cultural exchange and transmutation (or transculturation). These obtain, even in the most extreme circumstances: “the reflexive cultures and consciousness of the European settlers and those of the Africans they enslaved, the ‘Indians’ they slaughtered, and the Asians they indentured were not, even in situations of the most extreme brutality, sealed off hermetically from each other . . .” (*The Black Atlantic* 2).¹⁸

One must, of course, exercise sensitivity when employing terms with racial connotations, but the use of the term “black” (as an inclusive term) is at least sanctioned by the fact that it is the term chosen by the people so designated, in preference to the terminology of Afrikaner nationalism (“Bantu”) or of white liberal (and now, perhaps, post-apartheid) discourse (“African”). The term “black” is associated in particular with the Black Consciousness movement, and its adoption marked a fundamental shift within the discourse of African resistance in this country.¹⁹ Some of the problems attendant on this use of the term “black”, with its apparent privileging of race over class or gender, and its appeal to a supposedly homogeneous “black experience”, will be examined in subsequent chapters.

PROTEST

The term “protest writing” has frequently been attached – almost as a generic term – to black writing in this country. Rive defines this as “literature . . . produced by the

¹⁷ Attwell enlarges on this important insight by suggesting the ‘black intellectual life in South Africa often seems to have the character of a Faustian wager’ – a wager which may (for example) relate to the writer’s use of English, or his appropriation of Western forms, or his troubled relationship with the Christian liberalism that was part of the legacy of the missionaries (16).

¹⁸ One should note that the context of Gilroy’s discussion is the United States.

¹⁹ Where it is necessary, for purposes of argument or clarification, to refer specifically to people of mixed racial descent, I use the term “coloured” (with a small “c” to distinguish it from the standard terminology of apartheid legislation, which uses “Coloured” . The group of people so designated are not a homogeneous group and are themselves divided over what term to use, or whether any differentiating term is in fact necessary. One can perhaps predict that the term “South African” will gradually find general acceptance.

black, unenfranchised non-citizens for those who have the vote and so can effect change” (“The Liberal Tradition” 26). Subsequent attempts at defining this tradition have usually echoed or developed this definition. Jane Watts accepts that while protest writing found “enthusiastic supporters among the entire literate black population, whose indignation and resentment it voiced”, it was “directed mainly at a white readership” (29). Its motivating force “whether recognised or not, was the hope that, once they became aware of the situation, the powerful white minority would do something to improve matters” (29). (Alternatively, the appeal may sometimes have been directed to the international community.) In other words, its politics were implicitly liberal and reformist. In the more militant, confrontational climate of the 1970s its gradualist, reformist and implicitly non-racial stance was politically unacceptable. For Mzamane, writing in 1991, “protest is a quest for accommodation, and not a struggle for empowerment” (“Cultivating a People’s Voice” 60). Ndebele’s critique of the assumptions and techniques of “protest” writing (*Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (1991)) will be a frequent point of reference in the pages that follow.

One aim of this study, however, is to question or resist the kind of reading which confirms or recycles a rather limited and stereotypical picture of black writing. It is tempting to subscribe to a master narrative of the growth of black political consciousness, and place texts in terms of this overarching scheme. One consequence of this kind of reading is that “*all* texts, in this account, but especially those of the early years, are allegorised as representing particular phases or periods, like coloured pins on a battle map” (Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity* 9). This study hopes to avoid this kind of over-simplification, and to give due recognition to the specificity of particular texts. I would endorse Attwell’s call for “a suspension of strong evaluations, whether aesthetic or political, until something like an adequate contextualisation has been achieved” (*Rewriting Modernity* 9).

REALISM

In what is perhaps the most systematic discussion of the genre of protest writing in South Africa, Cornwell draws on Jakobson’s analysis of the different features of the communicative act.²⁰ Each of the six factors present in any act of verbal communication (addresser, addressee, message, contact, code and context)

²⁰ I quote here from an article by Cornwell published in *English in Africa* in 1980, rather than from his MA thesis (1979), since the article is likely to be more accessible.

corresponds with a particular function of language, and “the verbal structure of the message depends primarily on the predominant function” (Jakobson 35). If the “emotive” function predominates, for example, then the main purpose of the message is to express the speaker’s attitude or emotion. If, on the other hand, the orientation is towards the “context”, then the “referential” function will be dominant. For Jakobson, the “poetic” function is found to be predominant when the focus is on the message for its own sake. “This function, by promoting the palpability of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects” (38). In Scholes’s words, “This emphasis forces us to consider the utterance as a structured object with a certain density and opacity” (153). This is obviously consistent with the view of the art object as a self-sufficient or autotelic entity bearing its own immanent meaning. Cornwell argues that “the orientation of protest literature [emerges] out of its *conative* function” (my emphasis 54), where the orientation is towards the addressee (the reader or audience).²¹ Jakobson explains that this finds its purest expression in imperative sentences. Where this function is dominant, the aim is to move or persuade or convince – rather than to convey information or express emotion or construct a self-referential text.

We can accept that this is a helpful way of defining the difference between protest writing and other forms of literature, without necessarily agreeing that Jakobson’s “poetic function” in fact defines or is coextensive with the category “literature”. From Jakobson’s own discussion it is clear that the poetic function is not restricted to poetry – as his analysis of the campaign slogan, “I Like Ike”, demonstrates. One can use Jakobson’s view of the poetic function of language to argue (as Scholes does) that literary works are not necessarily “cut off from the world”: what we have is “a literary tension between the utterance as communicative and externally referential on the one hand – and as incommunicative and self-referential, on the other” (155).

Cornwell suggests that the referential function is almost as important in protest literature as the conative function: for the reader to be moved or persuaded by a work of protest literature, he or she must in the first place be convinced that it describes an existing state of affairs in a way that is convincing or accurate:

²¹ An alternative term would be “pragmatic” (this is the term used by M.H. Abrams in his discussion of the “orientation” of critical theories in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953).

For while the writings in question make no claim to be factual or true in the logical or strictly referential sense, one of the first things to strike the reader is their deliberate and unequivocal attempt to involve him in a verifiable external world – the world of contemporary South Africa We might say that what Jakobson calls the referential function is unusually prominent in the hierarchy of functions carried out by protest fiction. (53)

This helps to explain why realism is the dominant mode of fictional writing by black South African writers. Grant argues that there are two broad varieties of literary realism, “conscientious realism”, predicated on a “correspondence theory” (in terms of which reality exists *a priori*), and “conscious realism”, based on a “coherence theory” (which emphasises the role of “intuitive perception” or the imagination) (9). Cornwell suggests that the “realism” of the black South African writer is likely to be of the “conscientious” variety: “His first obligation is towards the quotidian reality common to millions of South Africans” (56). (He comes up with his own term, “uncompromising realism”, and also employs the more familiar term, “critical realism”.)

If this kind of realism is, as Cornwell argues, “the logical vehicle for protest fiction” (56), then some of objections that have been raised against realism fall away – at least in the South African context.²² It must, of course, be recognised that realist fiction (of whatever kind) never provides us with “a slice of life” or with a direct, mirror-like reflection of reality – for the simple reason that its version of reality is mediated through language, and language, of course, is not a transparent or ideologically neutral medium (we are all post-Saussureans and post-Bakhtinians). In addition, as writers since Aristotle have understood, the literary text is inevitably a product of a process of selection and arrangement, and possesses some kind of internal coherence. No matter how explicitly a writer claims to be simply reflecting what he sees (“life” or “reality” or “nature”), this can never in fact be the case: we are always given a particular view or version of reality, coloured by the attitudes, assumptions, values and experience of the author, and influenced by his or her

²² Morris argues that “the language of critical detraction as applied to realism . . . denies any means of evaluating or differentiating the vast disparate range of writing that goes under the label of realism. . . . It also fails to take account of the complexity and variety of aesthetic, intellectual and pleasurable experiences that are subsumed under the term ‘reading’” (119). She criticizes in particular “the unhelpful binary opposition that misrepresents realism as the conservative other to avante garde experimentalism” (132). “Sceptical anti-realism” has, she suggests, become “the new orthodoxy within poststructural and postmodern cultural theory” (135).

position in society. Nevertheless, writers go to great lengths to achieve verisimilitude, or the “effect” of reality: one of the distinguishing features of the novel is its ability to accommodate almost anything, from family histories to shopping lists or inventories to (in Alex la Guma’s work) almost microscopically detailed descriptions of the mould and grime that accumulates in the “tenements of the poor” (*A Walk in the Night* 34). One recalls Henry James’s observation (in “The Art of Fiction”) that “the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to . . . be the supreme virtue of a novel” (Morris 89).

Perhaps the broadest definition of realist writing is that offered by Morris: “any writing that is based on an implicit or explicit assumption that it is possible to communicate about a reality beyond the writing” (6). She suggests that the reader of realist fiction enters into an “implicit communicative contract” (an agreement that there exists “an extra-textual real-world”). She goes on to argue that this “performative investment in the possibility of communicative knowledge undoubtedly joins realism, whatever its subject matter, to the emancipatory project of the Enlightenment (132). Clearly, protest writing is predicated on and driven by the assumption or belief that there is an existing state of affairs (“a reality beyond the writing”) that needs to be altered if a more just and equitable society is to be attained – and it assumes a reader or audience capable of what Morris calls “normative judgement” (156).

There is an obvious problem, however, in the case of a body of writing whose *raison d’être* is to protest against an existing state of affairs, or to conscientise and mobilise its audience: if the writing depends for its effect on its reference to an existing state of affairs, what happens when that referent no longer exists? To take two simple examples: how in post-1994 South Africa do we read poems calling for the release of Mandela, or poetry detailing conditions on Robben Island, when anyone can catch the Robben Island ferry and be taken on a guided tour by an ex-political prisoner? Or how does one now respond to Sepamla’s “To Whom it May Concern”, a poem which evokes the plight of the black South African who is “subject” at every turn to a maze of laws and regulations which deny him the most elementary rights in the country of his birth? I remember teaching this poem to a class of white mainly Afrikaans-speaking students at Stellenbosch University in the same week that a whites-only election was held to elect a whites-only parliament: in that context, the poem’s title had a very specific and challenging application. Clearly, in the context of

a new, democratic dispensation, the poem no longer has the force or application it once did – but does that mean that its interest or significance for us now has been exhausted? In so far as a text is simply a vehicle for the communication of a political message, in language that is simple, direct and unambiguous, it is bound to its particular context, and would seem to have a built-in expiry date. In so far as it uses the resources of language in interesting and innovative ways, or displays formal inventiveness, or moves beyond a surface representation of a “spectacular” reality, it will continue to speak to its audience, even as the apartheid era recedes into history. The post-1994 context of this study means that one is necessarily rereading and re-evaluating texts that are familiar, but at the same time altered by their different context of their reception.

POSTCOLONIALITY

“Postcolonialism” has come rather late to South African literary studies, but this has not prevented its rapid advance in the academy, to the point where it has almost achieved hegemonic status – something which not all South African critics have welcomed.²³ It is, however, difficult to see how the perspectives afforded by postcolonial theory and criticism can be resisted: “If we understand postcoloniality as referring to an historical and cultural condition, one in which the legacies of colonialism have yet to be transcended, then South Africans are hardly in a position to refuse the term” (Attwell, “Introduction” 1).²⁴

One nevertheless enters into the postcolonial field with some trepidation. In the first place, as various local critics have pointed out, one is faced with the somewhat peculiar South African case history: when does South Africa become “postcolonial”?²⁵ In 1652, when Jan van Riebeeck established the first permanent white settlement at the Cape?²⁶ In 1910, when the Union of South Africa was formed, uniting the British colonies with the Boer republics? In 1948, with the rise to power of Dr Malan and the National Party (as the representatives of Afrikaner nationalism, they

²³ “I feel there is some evidence that post-colonial enquiries in this country are, at worst, tending to become a hegemony of their own, increasingly inward-looking and too often based around a set of clichés about our literary and cultural past and present” (Sole, “Acceptance Speech” 355).

²⁴ Attwell was introducing a special issue of the journal *Current Writing* which aimed to explore the meaning of postcoloniality in the South African context. It helped to generate a sometimes acrimonious critical debate.

²⁵ See, for example, Visser (“Postcoloniality of a Special Type”), 82-83.

²⁶ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin use the term “post-colonial” to cover “all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day” (2).

saw this as the culmination of their anti-colonial struggle)? In 1961, the year in which Dr Verwoerd led South Africa out of the Commonwealth and declared a Republic? Or in 1994, the year in which black South Africans, led by Nelson Mandela and the ANC, were finally able to participate in national democratic elections and form a fully representative government? And if we are to confer postcoloniality on South Africa at some point, how does this apply to the white (settler) minority? Are Gordimer and Coetzee, for example, postcolonial writers?

The brief discussion of South Africa in *The Empire Writes Back* is symptomatic of the difficulty of fitting this country into the postcolonial frame. The authors point out that while white South African literature has “clear affinities” with the literatures of the “settler colonies” (Australia, Canada, New Zealand), black South African literature “might be more fruitfully compared with that of other African countries” (27). They note, however, that South Africa’s racial politics “creates a political vortex into which much of the literature of the area, both Black and white, is drawn” (27).

Even apart from these local difficulties, the term “postcolonial” (or “post-colonial”) is beset with problems. “No word is more seductive . . . and few words have proved more elusive,” argues Parry. “There is a constant slippage between significations of an historical transition, a cultural location, a discursive stance, and an epochal condition” (“The Postcolonial” 3). A major difficulty is that in assuming the existence of a globalised condition (“postcoloniality”, “the postcolonial”, “postcolonial space”, “postcolonial discourse”, “the postcolonial Other”, etc.) the term almost necessarily has the effect of suppressing or eliding local histories and particular circumstances. It implies that colonialism was a more or less distinct set of practices, informed by a particular discourse, which affected subject peoples around the globe in comparable ways. (In this respect, its founding text is Said’s *Orientalism* (1978).) As McClintock points out, the term “re-orient[s] the globe once more around a single binary opposition: colonial/postcolonial” (292) – thereby also effacing what are in some cases thousands of years of pre-colonial history. The result can be “a panoptic tendency to view the globe within generic abstractions voided of political nuance” (McClintock 293). In particular, the prefix “post” might seem to imply that colonial domination ended with formal independence, when in fact its legacy continues and assumes new forms in what is euphemistically referred to as “the new world order” – the present era of global capitalism and neo-colonialism. JanMohamed goes so far as to propose the terms “dominant colonialism” and “hegemonic colonialism” to

describe what he sees as two stages of the same process: “The moment of ‘independence’ – with the native’s obligatory, ritualised acceptance of Western forms of parliamentary government – marks the formal transition to hegemonic colonialism” (62).

Apart from these conceptual or definitional problems, postcolonialism is itself hardly a unified field, either theoretically or in the ways in which it has been applied. On the one hand De Kock – himself a proponent of postcolonial approaches – concedes that there is a risk of “agglomerating various approaches in the ‘post’ mode” and creating “a dehistoricised monolith of essential knowledge” (“Postcolonial Analysis” 45). On the other hand, according to Moore-Gilbert, such has been the “elasticity” of the term that “some commentators have begun to express anxiety that there may be a danger of it imploding as an analytical construct with any real cutting edge” (11). Postcolonial criticism is, he suggests, so riven by internal conflicts that it may splinter into “a series of competing, mutually incompatible or even antagonistic practices” (11). The “monolithic” tendency is associated with colonial discourse theory, inaugurated by Said’s *Orientalism*. This approach is largely informed by poststructuralist or postmodernist approaches to textuality, language and the constitution of identity (Foucault, Derrida, Lacan), and often seems to suggest that the colonised subject is constituted entirely by discourse – thereby severely limiting the possibilities of agency or resistance.²⁷ Given the realities of the South African situation, and our particular history of struggle and resistance, any approach which theorises oppression primarily in discursive terms (“epistemic violence”),²⁸ or which discounts the ability of the colonised to resist oppression and exploitation through political action, is clearly problematic. The underlying problem with colonial discourse analysis is, as Williams and Chrisman point out, that it “tends to position colonial/imperial subjectivity as having epistemological and ontological primacy; native or subaltern subjects feature as secondary ‘subject-effects’ allowed, according to the critic, greater or lesser degrees of oppositional power within the discourse of empire” (16). In the somewhat crisper formulation of Mishra and Hodge, “political

²⁷ Moore-Gilbert notes that “perhaps the most heated current debate concerns the political implications of the incorporation of French-derived ‘high’ theory into postcolonial analysis” (17). I should express an indebtedness to Moore-Gilbert’s well-informed and balanced discussion of postcolonial theory.

²⁸ See Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak”: “The clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other” (24-25).

insurgency is replaced by discursive radicalism” (278).²⁹ The discourses of the anti-colonial liberation movements are often criticized for their “nativism” or their “cultural nationalism” – and the role played by nationalist movements in resisting colonialism is often downplayed.³⁰ Some critics (notably Ahmad) go so far as to suggest that postcolonialism is politically regressive, and (somewhat tendentiously) they point to the institutional location of some of its leading theorists.³¹

The other founding theorist of postcolonialism is of course Fanon, and the Fanon of *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) proposes a stark Manichean schema to describe the colonial world. The colonial world is “a world cut in two” and “inhabited by two different species” (30). “As if to show the totalitarian character of colonial exploitation, the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil” (32). In this version of postcolonial thought “native” and “settler” represent irreconcilable opposites, and the violence which underpins the colonial order requires a corresponding, cleansing violence if the colonised is to free himself/herself – both psychologically and politically. It is not difficult to see how the analysis of the colonial world as a “Manichean” world must have resonated with Biko and the proponents of Black Consciousness in South Africa. One problem with this view, as Cooper and others have pointed out, is that “Manichean identity takes one monolithic duality as fundamentally descriptive of the person” (44), with the implication that one is trapped in a particular subject position. In stark contrast to Fanon, the strain of postcolonial theory represented in particular by Bhabha attempts to move beyond a conception of colonial relations as determined by binary oppositions (settler/native; coloniser/colonised). Instead, this view emphasises what Moore-Gilbert calls “the mutualities and negotiations across the colonial divide” (116). For Bhabha, colonial discourse is not as coherent, stable, consistent or confident as Said’s account of it might suggest. The coloniser is in fact partly dependent on the colonised for the

²⁹ This comment is made in the context of their critique of *The Empire Writes Back*, the critical text which more than any other helped to place postcolonial studies on the academic map. They elaborate as follows: “The danger here is that the post-colonial is reduced to a purely textual phenomenon, as if power is simply a matter of discourse and it is only through discourse that counter-claims might be made” (278).

³⁰ These are issues that will be explored in more detail in the context of the Black Consciousness and the discourse of resistance in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s.

³¹ The implication (or sometimes the accusation) is that postcolonialism is largely the product of the intellectual work of a privileged and deracinated elite who have appropriated “European ‘high’ theory” for their own purposes. The most obvious example of this kind of attack is Ahmad’s *In Theory* (1992). Some of his points are taken up by South African critics, in particular Sole (“South Africa Passes the Posts”) and Visser (“Postcoloniality of a Special Type”).

confirmation of his/her identity, and through “mimicry” the colonised can disturb or unsettle the coloniser’s authority.³²

The work of Bhabha and others, in drawing attention to the complexity of colonial relations, and focussing attention on subjectivity, is undoubtedly valuable. This kind of analysis underlies Attwell’s contention that, even in the case of South Africa, the colonial or racial dichotomies are not as simple or clear-cut as they might appear:

Both ‘settler’ and ‘native’ forms of consciousness . . . are shaped to a considerable degree by the emergence of the other form of articulation. That is to say, the poles are attracted not merely by their opposition to one another; rather, their construction is founded on a dialogic principle – sometimes imitative, sometimes hostile – so that any simple theoretical polarity becomes unworkable. (“Introduction” 5)

This view complicates the generally received picture of the South African situation as entirely polarised in Fanonian terms, and cautions one against adopting over-simple or essentialised views of identity based on either “blackness” or “whiteness”. The interventions of Ndebele (*Rediscovery of the Ordinary*) and Sachs (“Preparing Ourselves for Freedom”) were in part intended to question an identity that had been constructed largely in response to apartheid.³³ One needs to acknowledge that there are no “pure” cultures, that identity (especially, perhaps, in the colonial situation) is necessarily complex, and that both sides of the racial divide are (or were) internally fractured in various ways (in terms, for example, of origin, or language, or ethnicity, or lineage, or class, or gender).

More recently Nuttall and Michael have suggested that, despite the legacy of apartheid, South Africa is “a place striking for its imbrication of multiple identities – identities that mythologies of apartheid, and of resistance to it, tended to silence” (*Senses of Culture* 1). They argue that “complex configurations, at least at the level of identity, were always there” – however much apartheid, with its ideology of separation, tried to mask them.³⁴ They quote Ndebele to the effect that a shared history has created “reluctant bonds” between oppressor and oppressed: “It was not

³² See in particular the early articles collected in *The Location of Culture* (1994), in particular “The Other Question” (66-84) and “Of Mimicry and Man” (85-92).

³³ This point is made by De Kock (“Postcolonial Analysis” 55-56).

³⁴ Similarly, they suggest, the liberation movement “strategically emphasized enforced separation” as a way of mobilizing resistance (2).

strangers who sat at the negotiating table, he remarks, and the ‘bonding’ seen there was ‘too remarkable’ not to have had a long history.” (9).

It is certainly true, as they point out, that South Africa has long been thought of as a place apart, separate from the rest of the world, fixated on race as a determinant of identity and (prior to 1994) “bound to a narrative of liberation” (1, 2). As Sole points out, apartheid was designed to keep “the different racial groups from mutual knowledge or common identity”. It is, he suggests, “little short of a miracle” that there has been “any cross-cultural interaction in the past” (“Democratising Culture” 1). Nuttall’s and Michael’s emphasis on the “intimacies and connectivities” that existed despite apartheid is clearly salutary – but it should not detract from a recognition of the grim realities of enforced segregation and racial oppression under apartheid. As a counter to the post-apartheid perspective of *Senses of Culture*, one might turn to *From South Africa*, the anthology of writing edited by Bunn and Taylor in 1987. Its flavour is captured by the opening paragraph of their introduction:

Almost a year after the introduction of the second State of Emergency in June 1986, the Botha regime, in announcements by its propaganda arm, the Department of Information, claims to have reduced violence in the country to a minimum. Yet even the most servile government newspapers speak of an “uneasy calm” and continue that Manichean style of rhetoric which habitually depicts white dread in terms of looming black clouds on the horizon. (13)

They go on to record that in the previous twelve months almost 35 000 people had been detained, including much of the leadership of the extra-parliamentary political organisations and the trade unions. They are, they say, reporting “from the battlefield”: South Africa is effectively a country at war, or “in the initial stages of a revolution” (14). In this climate it is not surprising that Menán du Plessis, a white writer and activist, should be quoted as saying, in a speech given at a “Jews for Justice” forum on “The Right to Know”:

It’s clear that the struggle for cultural freedom is perceived as one aspect of, and indivisible from, the general struggle for national liberation. And if ordinary people, often heartbreakingly young people, are prepared to make terrifying sacrifices for the sake of these freedoms, it seems almost incumbent on artists – in their turn – to stand up and declare themselves willing to fight shoulder to shoulder with the people. (17)

In exploring the literature and culture of the apartheid period, then, one needs to negotiate between the Fanonian view of South Africa as a starkly polarised society where oppressor and oppressed are locked together in a grim struggle (although even here, arguably, the image implies some kind of mutuality), and the alternative view which sees colonialism as transactional, rather than oppositional, and employs the concepts of hybridity or creolisation and ambivalence. The problem, as Parry defines it, is to understand how what she calls the “dialogical model” relates to “the record of colonialism as violent dispossession achieved by military force and sustained by institutional power, or to the received perceptions of the quotidian colonial world as a place of economic exploitation, social division, and political conflict” (“The Postcolonial” 26). Despite the problems attendant on the term “postcolonial”, the kind of thought and analysis associated with this approach has opened up important issues for debate and investigation. Of particular value is the attention given to culture, to subjectivity and to the question of identity. The perspectives and insights made available by postcolonial critics and theorists are clearly relevant to the study of South African literature and culture – but they need to be held in balance with the specificities of the South African situation.

POSITIONALITY

If texts are constructed by particular readers in particular ways, then one cannot claim either objectivity or neutrality in one’s reading of particular texts. It follows that I need to say something about my own position as white South African academic writing about the work of black South Africans. Some would view this as a disqualification: do I, can I, should I claim to speak with any authority?

In spite of its apparent plausibility, there are serious problems with a position that, as it were, disqualifies readers on the grounds of race, class, gender, nationality or whatever. This kind of argument assumes, in particular, that black South Africans – by virtue of being black – have privileged access to cultural or racial knowledge and experience that is unavailable to white South Africans. It assumes “a reflexive relationship between black intellectuals and their racial constituency” (Sole, “South Africa Passes the Posts” 143).³⁵ This is a position that can hardly be seriously

³⁵ Sole gives a more extended discussion of this problem in his doctoral study, ‘Authority, Authenticity and the Black Writer’ (see for example pp. 17 -21).

sustained. One cannot regard all black writers or critics as “authentic” or reliable representatives and interpreters of their people’s cultural experience – unless one regards the black population as entirely homogeneous, with no significant differences in terms of ethnicity, class, age, education, region, gender, political affiliation, etc.³⁶ This view would also seem to preclude any critical role for a black writer or intellectual. This has not, however, prevented such arguments from being put from time to time, a case in point being Mzamane’s critique of Shava’s *A People’s Voice* (1989). The opening paragraph of his extended review reads:

The most useful thing about Piniel Viriri Shava’s *A People’s Voice: Black South African Writing in the Twentieth Century* is its quite unintended demonstration of the need to cultivate an authentic people’s voice in the criticism of South African literature.
 (“Cultivating a People’s Voice” 59).

Ironically, here we have one black (South African) critic telling another black (Zimbabwean) critic that his approach lacks authenticity – or even sufficient familiarity with the field of study. This is attributed to the influence of Shava’s “mentor”, Rowland Smith (“He echoes Smith in his mimic’s voice” (65)), and to Shava’s entrapment in a “bourgeois liberal, formalist criticism” (64) – a result of the fact that he has “internalised the dominant mode of discourse in the West” (66).³⁷ Clearly then, being black is not in itself a guarantee of anything. Interestingly, two critics whom Mzamane does cite favourably, and at some length, are both white South Africans – Tim Couzens and Mike Kirkwood.

Another case in point is the criticism of Lewis Nkosi, which has evolved significantly from his early, dismissive response to the writing of black South Africans. His well-known essay begins:

With the best will in the world it is impossible to detect in the fiction of black South Africans any significant and complex talent which responds with both vigour of the imagination and sufficient technical resources, to the problems posed by conditions in South Africa.
 (“Fiction by Black South Africans” 130)

³⁶ Gilroy points out that “cultural insiderism” gives race or ethnicity “an incontestable priority over all other dimensions of . . . social and historical experience, cultures and identities” (3).

³⁷ Is there such a thing as “the West” – and what might its “dominant mode of discourse” be, one wonders.

Nkosi goes on to explain that “what we do get from South Africa . . . is the journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature” (132). One reason for this is that black South Africans apparently write as though they were entirely unaware of “the accumulated example of modern European literature” and “as though Dostoevsky, Kafka or Joyce had never lived” (130). This (rather odd) invocation of the artistic norms of European modernism would presumably – in Mzamane’s eyes at least – disqualify Nkosi from serious consideration – on the grounds that his voice is not “authentic”. Clearly, then (whatever the shortcomings of either Shava’s or Nkosi’s approach), race or “blackness” is not a guarantee of “authenticity” (or indeed, I would argue, of anything else).

If one needs the counter-example of a black South African writer who does not invoke essentialist or simplistic notions of “blackness” or “authenticity”, then one need look no further than Ndebele (notwithstanding his own appreciation of and indebtedness to Black Consciousness). His cultural and critical essays display what De Kock calls “a persistently critical awareness of the sources and mediations of oppositional thinking” (“Postcolonial Analysis” 56) – and in particular an awareness of the need for African writers and intellectuals to sever their dependence on information produced and disseminated by “liberal institutions” (“Turkish Tales” 24). Ndebele argues that this dependence helps to explain the resort to “sloganeering” on the part of the oppressed: “The slogan is the substitution of the gut response for clarity of analysis based on systematically acquired information” (25). Ndebele anticipates the argument that “Africans *do* have information about themselves as the actual sufferers” (in other words, information arising from their experience of being black and oppressed), but he argues that such information has only limited validity: “Only institutionalised information is subject to ideological scrutiny” – and, unfortunately, he says, “there has not been, among Africans, a consistently original intellectual and analytical base from which to domesticate information and turn it into a truly transforming tool of liberation” (26). His argument implies that while, on the one hand, black South Africans need to draw on and affirm their own historical, political and cultural experience and knowledge, it is impossible to do so in a simple, unmediated or untheorised way – all of which suggests that being “black” does not in itself confer authority or legitimacy or authenticity.³⁸

³⁸ At the same time, one must of course understand the imperative that led many black writers, in the context of mounting resistance to apartheid in the 1970s and 1980s, to affirm a black identity forged in

I am of course conscious that as a white South African I may seem to be guilty of special pleading in developing this kind of argument. One obviously cannot claim the intimate knowledge of a cultural insider, and one must acknowledge that one speaks from a position of personal and structural privilege (almost automatically conferred on one by virtue of one's white skin). My own limited exposure to the conditions experienced by black communities under apartheid, and my own limited ability to speak a black language, are serious constraints. I take seriously the question raised by Vaughan, writing in response to the 1981 York Conference (which brought together black and white writers and critics from Southern Africa):

It leads, however, to another point that concerns me . . . and this involves the relation between white academic critics and black writers and (self-) critics. Is, indeed, such a relation possible, let alone significant? As one white academic critic, I have felt myself drawn more and more to the position that the most socially significant developments in literature in South Africa are taking place in black township literature. To engage with this literature in a socio-critical spirit has come to represent an absolute critical priority. At the same time, this engagement raises the question of critical "address". Black township literature is written by and for the inhabitants of black townships: its concepts, and the criticism and self-criticism that sustain and correct it, are derived largely from the ideological and political milieu of the township – a milieu I do not share, except in the form of certain texts, which, furthermore, come to me divorced from their normative contextual associations.

("Ideological Directions" 62)

Ideally a critic, if he or she wishes to engage with the cultural production of black South Africans, should have some familiarity with the dynamics of black community life and should be fluent in at least one indigenous language. While acknowledging my particular limitations, however, I need to point to the obvious fact that black writers did not write for an exclusively black, South African, township audience, and would not have wanted to impose limits on their potential readership. In his article, "Constructing the 'Cross-Border' Reader", Nkosi suggests that in a divided society like South Africa's, where "boundaries and borders seem to be a condition of our

struggle and mobilise resistance to apartheid on that basis. The success of this strategy (and for the founders of Black Consciousness it was a strategy) can be gauged by the way in which the political and cultural landscape of South Africa was transformed in the decade following the Soweto uprising of 1976. It would be idle to question either the effectiveness of Black Consciousness as a political and cultural movement - although this does not preclude criticism of some of its assumptions.

national life” (40), any process of communication will necessitate the crossing of linguistic, cultural, racial or national borders. He goes on to suggest that “for the black writer the kind of cross-border reader implied may be none other than the white South African reader” (45) – and he argues that this might apply “even in the case of such valorised ‘township’ texts as [those of] Mtutuzeli Matshoba” (46). His argument leads him to conclude that “the character and identity of South African literature is in fact determined “somewhere else, by people outside the community in whose name the writer claims to be speaking” (48).³⁹

Nor can one suppose that the literature produced by black writers is the product of a pure, uncontaminated, indigenous black cultural experience (if such a thing indeed exists). By choosing to write and publish in English, and by appropriating a particular literary form (in this case, the short story), they utilise non-indigenous traditions and conventions, and make their work available, not only to a wider South African audience, but also to a world audience. Moreover (as the preceding discussion has shown) if one regards cultural syncreticity as “an inescapable and characteristic feature of all postcolonial societies” (Ashcroft et al 30), then it is difficult to sustain the notion of a simple division between cultural “insiders” and “outsiders”.

One must conclude that no reader or critic should feel the need to explain or apologise for his or her interest in African literature and culture, or in black South African writing in particular. Ultimately, this kind of argument assumes that we are trapped within fixed, racial (or class or gender) identities. In fact, we inhabit multiple identities. As Brenda Cooper puts it, in the context of her discussion of her own position as “a white South African female critic of African fiction” (40): “We are all travellers across a network of changing, nomadic identities” (44).⁴⁰ It is also contradicted by the ability of literary (and other) texts to speak to readers who are differently situated in the world, but who have the willingness and receptivity to enter

³⁹ In the case of white South African writing in English, he argues, the “cross-border” reader is likely to be a “metropolitan reader in New York, London, or Paris” (48).

⁴⁰ Cooper quotes Spivak’s response to white male students in the United States who feel silenced: “I say to them, why not develop a certain degree of rage against the history that has written such an abject script for you that you are silenced’. Then you begin to investigate what it is that silences you, rather than take this very deterministic position – since my skin colour is this, since my sex is this, I cannot speak. I call these things . . . somewhat derisively, chromatism . . . and genitalism” (46). I would agree with Cooper that one can “transform the script prepared for [one] and speak another role, one that understands power and oppression” (46). Ultimately her position (and mine) rests on a progressive humanism (rather than on what she calls a “Eurocentric liberal humanism” (48).

into the world of the text. There is, arguably, such a thing as the republic of letters, and it has no boundaries or border posts (apart of course from the very serious limits imposed by literacy, education and economics).

This study flows from my own interest in literary texts (of many kinds). As I have suggested, literary works are, paradoxically, both time-bound and timeless – a fact which helps to explain both their continuing interest, and the impossibility of final interpretation. It also follows that texts are appropriated or transformed by those who read them – and any reader inevitably brings to bear his or her own knowledge, experience, interests, expectations – and limitations. It is difficult, then, to claim that some readings are privileged over others – unless one employs some notion of literary and cultural competence. What one can hope to do, as a literary critic or scholar, is to produce readings that are at least self-reflexive and informed by some understanding of both text and context, and of the conventions and operations of literary works. My interest in the writing of black South Africans is a product of my ongoing personal and professional interest in and engagement with literary works, but it is also (inevitably) influenced by my own political affiliations and commitments. Conditions in South Africa in the 1980s made it difficult not to actively oppose the apartheid regime, and the formation of the UDF in 1983 created the political space in which to do so. My own political activity during that decade has given me a fairly immediate understanding of the politics of the period, and its impact on particular oppressed communities.

Finally, this study is of course conditioned by the post-apartheid perspective from which it is written. The present may still be disfigured by the legacy of apartheid – the economic disabilities and inequalities resulting from apartheid continue, and the trauma inflicted on individuals and communities lives on – but it does at least provide some perspective from which to view the recent past, and from which to reread texts that can be seen as products of very specific conditions. There is, as Chapman puts it, a “dialectical relation” between “past significance” and “present meaning”, and this means acknowledging both the original context of production and the present context of reception: “the structure of the work is created in specific times, places and conditions, but lives in the process of its reception” (Chapman, “Writing Literary History in South Africa” 42).

CHAPTER 2: R.R.R. DHLOMO AND EARLY BLACK WRITING IN ENGLISH¹

One needs to acknowledge that there are important continuities (as well as striking differences) between the writers associated with *Drum* and the writers of the 1930s, whose most obvious representatives are H.I.E. and R.R.R. Dhlomo.² These earlier writers were invariably mission-educated, worked as journalists or newspaper editors, and usually played an active role in the public sphere. Their most remarkable predecessor was undoubtedly Sol Plaatje, newspaper editor, linguist and translator, founding member (and General Secretary) of the South African Native National Congress (later the African National Congress) and author of *Mhudi*, the first novel written in English by a black South African (published by Lovedale in 1930).³

Early black writers worked as journalists for the obvious reason that newspapers, along with the mission presses, provided almost their only outlet for expression. The early black press saw its purpose as being to inform and educate, and to provide a forum for opinion and a platform for protest. The most important of these newspapers in the 1930s and 1940s was *Bantu World*, founded in 1932 and taken over in 1933 by the Argus Printing and Publishing Company.⁴ Its editor during this period was R.V. Selope Thema. In his unpublished autobiography, “From Cattle-herding to the Editor’s Chair” (c. 1935) he constructs a master-narrative of his progress from childhood in a Pedi village to the editorship of *Bantu World* - a passage from “barbarism” to “civilisation” (Switzer, “*Bantu World*” 191). These terms are echoed

¹ This chapter draws on an article entitled “R.R.R. Dhlomo and the Early Black South African Short Story in English”, published in *Current Writing* 17.1 (2005): 52-69. I am grateful to Margaret Lenta for her editorial assistance.

² I should acknowledge my indebtedness to the research of Tim Couzens, whose work in the 1970s helped rescue early black writing in English from decades of neglect. He published a number of articles in the 1970s; his doctoral thesis on H.I.E. Dhlomo was published as *The New African: A Study of the Life and Work of H.I.E. Dhlomo* (1985). A recent number of *English in Africa* (Vol. 30, No. 2, 2003) celebrates his contribution and includes a bibliography of his publications.

³ Plaatje’s life and achievements are the subject of Willan’s admirable study, *Sol Plaatje: A Biography* (1984). Plaatje, who was a young man at the time of the Anglo-Boer War, and died in 1932, represents an older generation of South African writer-intellectuals than the Dhlomo brothers: for the Dhlomos, he and John Dube, founder of the Ohlange Institute and *Ilanga Lase Natal*, would have been pioneering and revered figures. His novel was completed by 1920, but Plaatje could not find a publisher, until Lovedale eventually accepted it in 1930.

⁴ It was a weekly publication, containing both African-language and English-language sections, and by 1946 had a weekly circulation of 24,000. According to Switzer, it “helped shape the form as well as the content of South Africa’s captive black press in the generation after 1932” (*Bantu World* 192).

in the tribute paid to *Bantu World* in 1935 by the *Pretoria News*, also from the Argus stable:

In the pages of *Bantu World* we are able to catch a glimpse of the black races as they struggle from civilisation to barbarism, from ignorance to knowledge, from an Africa that has been theirs from the dawn of history to an Africa remoulded by . . . Western Europe – a hand of culture, but a hand that can chastise.

(Switzer 196).

In terms of ideology⁵ and outlook, members of the Dhlomos' generation of writers were aspirant middle-class, anxious to prove their "civilised" and "progressive" credentials, and imbued with Christian norms and values. The members of this emergent group saw themselves as "new Africans" and were concerned to distance themselves both from both the tribal past and from the new *marabi* culture that had developed in the inner-city slumyards of Johannesburg. Couzens argues that a key text in understanding the Dhlomos and their generation is *The African Yearly Register: Being an Illustrated National Biographical Dictionary (Who's Who) of Black Folks in South Africa* (1930), compiled and edited by T.D. Mveli Skota. By looking at these biographies of leading Africans of the time, one gains an appreciation of "the ethos from which the black writers of the 1930s sprang, their aspirations, their ideology and their class" (*New African* 1). He finds that the favourite terms of approbation are "progressive", "hard worker", "good speaker", "gentleman" and "true Christian". In particular, the word "progressive" functions as "the ideological touchstone or keyword of the whole book" (*New African* 6-7). Skota explains that his intention is to counter the view of Africans as "savages prone to witchcraft, cannibalism and other vices credited to barbarians" (quoted in *New African* 4). Clearly one cannot underestimate the impact of the prevailing European (and missionary) view of Africa and Africans as primitive, backward, "heathen" – and in need of salvation and enlightenment. Skota's publication is a modest attempt to counter this view of Africa and Africans – but it does so in terms largely dictated by the discourse of the coloniser and the missionary.

⁵ I use ideology here in a neutral sense to refer to the class (or racial or gendered) character of a particular system of ideas.

THE SHORT STORY AND EARLY BLACK WRITING

Newspaper publication tended to favour expression in the form of poetry, and the essay, but the occasional short story was also published. An example of one of these early short stories is A.S. Vil-Nkomo's "Mhlutshwa Comes To Johannesburg", published in *Bantu World* on 29 April 1933.⁶ It centres on the decision by the elder of a pair of brothers to leave the farm on which they work and go to Johannesburg in search of employment and personal betterment. The story is notable for its brevity (it is just over 700 words long) and for its rudimentary nature: there is a conspicuous lack of descriptive detail and little development of character, and the dialogue between the two brothers is expressed in the entirely inappropriate register of formal English ("I whom am younger than you fail to see the force of your argument"). It does at least sketch in simple terms the predicament of the rural black farm worker – the elder brother seeks to escape the "tyranny of Has-Broek farm" by going to the city – and serves as an early instance of the "Jim Comes to Joburg" story.

R.R.R. Dhlomo was perhaps the most significant precursor of the *Drum* writers. His early novel, *An African Tragedy* (1928), shows the influence of missionary discourse. It is essentially a morality tale: the central character, Robert Zulu – "a young Christian teacher in the mission" (2) – is a kind of Everyman who gives way to temptation and goes to the bad in the city. His first "disastrous step" is his "bad choice of companions" (3), and his second is the reckless pursuit of pleasure – "that sort of pleasure for which Johannesburg is so notorious" (3). His moral decline is rapid: within a few months he is "a reckless, dissolute young man" (3). The narrator's horror and dismay are communicated to the reader through explicit commentary. At one point there is a lengthy homily on the evils of Prospect Township – "a revolting, immoral place; where the black sons and daughters of Africa are kicked about by their unbridled passions as a football is on the playfields" (5). The horror is heightened by the observation that "Ministers – in names and collar only – live in filthy closeness with loose women" (5). After a vehement denunciation of the failure of professed Christians to intervene, the narrator apologises to the reader: "Pardon my digression, my poor effort being to write the story of Robert Zulu as he handed it to me for publication – not to presume to teach or preach" (7). The author's didactic intent could not in fact be clearer, or the Christian frame of reference more

⁶ I reproduce the story as an Appendix.

explicit: his cautionary tale concludes with Robert infecting his innocent rural bride with syphilis, so that their child is born blind. There is an equivocal deathbed scene, and the novel concludes with a reading of psalm 139. In spite of its brevity (it is only 40 pages long), its one-dimensional characterisation and its insistent moralising, the novel belongs to the same genre as Paton's *Cry, The Beloved Country* (1948), which uses the same Christian frame of reference and rests on the same over-simple opposition between rural innocence and urban depravity. All three texts – the short story by Vil-Nkomo, and the novels by Dhlomo and Paton – mark stages in the development of the “Jim Comes to Joburg” genre.⁷

In her recent study of the influence and dissemination of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Hofmeyr describes the extent to which Protestant religious education relied on allegory, and the way in which “literature” was “heavily moralised”: “. . . on the one hand, it could ‘improve’ its readers and ‘save’ them from corrupting pastimes; on the other, it could show them an instance of an elevated national product to which ‘their’ people could aspire” (Hofmeyr 126). Although Dhlomo was educated at the Ohlange Institute and Adams College, his novel was published by Lovedale (described by Hofmeyr as ‘one of the subcontinent’s Bunyan epicentres’ (2004: 120)), and these assumptions about literature and its function would have been widespread among the missionary-educated elite at the time. The pressures or constraints of missionary influence and publication are clearly evident in Dhlomo's text: the Publisher's Note to *An African Tragedy* commends the book “as a contribution towards staying the decline of Native life in large cities and towns.” Subsequent critics (writing from a very different era, with their own critical agendas) have often dismissed Dhlomo's text – in some cases, perhaps, without giving sufficient consideration to its informing context. Gray (*Southern African Literature* 173) describes the novel as “a rudimentary attempt at transforming pamphleteering into fiction” (*South African Literature* 173), while Mzamane describes this phase of black writing as “a literature of converts and uncritical acceptance” (“Early Trends” 152). Shava criticizes the novel's failure to examine the material conditions and socio-economic pressures that contribute to the breakdown of both traditional and Christian norms and values. If one places the novel in the context of its time, however, one

⁷ Stephen Gray has surveyed the field in his 1985 article, “Third World Meets First World: The Theme of ‘Jim Comes to Joburg’ in South African English Fiction”.

recognises the extent to which it reflects the prevalent concerns of members of Dhlomo's class.

In 1924 the newspaper *Umteteli wa Bantu* ran a competition on the dangers of town life: Couzens quotes an extract from Douglas C. Zulu's prize-winning essay, in which he urges a cousin to stay at the Hostel of the Helping Hand club, where he will be introduced to "healthy outdoor games . . . educative lectures . . . and social and religious gatherings" ("Social Ethos of Black Writing" 67). He is expressly advised to "pick his companions carefully". Robert Zulu's "first disastrous step" was also "his bad choice of companions" (*African Tragedy* 3). The moral concerns of *An African Tragedy* are consistent with the views expressed by Dhlomo and others in newspaper articles during this period and represent an understandable response to what was seen as the erosion of traditional and Christian norms and values.

THE "MARABI MENACE"

In his Preface to *An African Tragedy*, Dhlomo explains that his work as a journalist for *Ilanga Lase Natal* brought him into close contact with the factors affecting people's lives "in this tumultuous city of Johannesburg". In his article on Johannesburg's "slumyard culture" from 1919 to 1940, Koch examines some of these factors:

It was here amidst the brutal conditions of town life that these classes were forced by the sheer need of survival to develop an alternative network of economic activities to subsidise low wages; and systems of social security to replace rural production and kinship systems. . . . 'Marabi' is the generic name that slum dwellers and others have given to the culture that permeated the yards of Johannesburg. (158)

For Dhlomo and others of the African elite, *marabi* (or, more generally, "jazz") was anathema: "The better educated regarded *marabi* as a threat to African community life and the 'civilised' status on which their claims to social and political rights were based" (Coplan 108). In an article written in 1927, entitled "Jazzing Craze", Dhlomo attacked "this jazzing craze or madness that has its victims in its octopus-like grasp" ("Jazzing Craze", *Ilanga Lase Natal* 5 August 1927; quoted by Coplan 122). In another article he warns against the kind of dancing that accompanied this music: "We, who dwell in teeming cities, are fully aware of the terrible results of these seemingly innocent pastimes on the after-lives of young people" (*Ilanga Lase Natal*

19 March 1926; quoted by Couzens in *The New African* 56). These views were echoed by other opinion-makers such as Mark Radebe, who according to Couzens was “the chief ideologist in music for the educated elite” (*New African* 69). Writing under the pseudonym “Musicus” in *Umteteli wa Bantu* (11 November 1933), Radebe wrote as follows:

The ‘Marabi’ dances and concerts, and the terrible ‘jazz’ music banged and wailed out of the doors of foul-smelling so-called halls are far from representing real African taste. They create wrong impressions. The Transvaal Bantu is to be complimented in the circumstances on the annual Eisteddfod, which, to a great extent, will help us abolish the ‘Marabi’ menace.

(Couzens 71) ⁸

Titlestad’s *Making the Changes* (2004) is an in-depth study of the ways in which jazz has been represented in South African writing and journalism. Typically, jazz (and specifically *marabi*) is portrayed as “the domain of embodied excess, instinctual abandonment and ‘primitive’ indulgence” (38), and Dhlomo’s *An African Tragedy* is a thinly fictionalised expression of views and concerns which were shared by members of Dhlomo’s class at the time. Titlestad quotes the scene where Robert Zulu gives way to drink and temptation. He “shivers involuntarily” as he enters the room where an organ is being “hammered by a drunken youth” and “couples – literally fastened to each other – were swaying giddily wildly, to this barbaric time” (39). As Titlestad puts it, “Zulu enters a realm of Dionysian excess” (390 – and he points out that Harlem Renaissance and early Modernist writing is replete with such representations. One should note, however, that the same subject matter could be treated rather differently. Modikwe Dikobe’s exploration of slumyard life in *The Marabi Dance* (1973) is free of the overt moralising that marks Dhlomo’s text – although the disreputable *marabi* culture is still opposed to Martha’s aspirations to respectability.⁹ This suggests the importance of education and class as formative factors: Dikobe came from a working class background, left school early, lived in

⁸ Ballantine discusses the way *marabi* was “pathologised” at the time, and compares this to the discourse surrounding jazz in the United States in the years following World War 1. He cites an article in the *New York American* in 1922 alleging that “moral disaster” was on its way as a result of the “pathological, nerve-irritating, sex-exciting music of jazz orchestras” (81).

⁹ The work *marabi* gains “metonymic valence, signifying a ‘disordered’ domain of desire, corruption and violence that absorbs and corrupts George [Martha’s lover]” (Titlestad 42). The novel ends (conservatively) with the exclusion of a lone *marabi* dancer from the church where the wedding between George (now rehabilitated) and Martha is being solemnised.

various townships in and around Johannesburg, and understands the culture of *marabi* from within.¹⁰

THE SHORT STORIES

The short stories which Dhlomo contributed to the weekly journal *Sjambok* between August 1929 and February 1931 are strikingly different in style and tone. They were written while Dhlomo was working as a clerk at the City and Suburban Mine in Johannesburg, and clearly owe a great deal to the tutelage of the editor of *Sjambok*, the dramatist and satirist Stephen Black.¹¹ H.I.E. Dhlomo describes Black's influence on his brother:

Mr Stephen, a highly strung artist and yet a cool and calculating investigator, taught Dhlomo many valuable lessons on the art and science of writing. One of these was that a writer must not project himself into the story and moralise or philosophise outside his characters . . . a weakness many of our writers still have. Another was that a writer should use language suited or natural to his characters.
(9)¹²

Black's journal clearly provided a very different context of publication from that of Lovedale Press.¹³ The stories in *Sjambok* (and, after 1931, in *Bantu World*) are an advance in literary terms on the earlier novel, and their depiction of mining conditions is clearly a product of first-hand observation and knowledge.¹⁴ In general, the material is presented dramatically, with extensive use of dialogue.¹⁵ Authorial intrusions are

¹⁰ Dikobe, whose real name was Marks Rammitloa, came to Johannesburg at the age of 10, lived initially in Sophiatown and Doornfontein, and worked in a number of occupations (as a newspaper seller, a hawker, a clerk, a domestic worker and a nightwatchman) before becoming involved in trade union work. He left school after Standard 6 but attended the night schools run by the South African Communist Party. He was detained and then banned in the early sixties, and as a listed person was unable to publish under his own name. His novel, which is set in the 1930s, was finally published in 1973.

¹¹ The *Sjambok* stories, as well as stories which appeared subsequently in *Bantu World*, are reprinted in *English in Africa* (2.1 March 1975). All subsequent references to the stories are to this edition of twenty stories in *English in Africa*. The guest editor of this number of the journal was Tim Couzens, who also contributed an Introduction.

¹² The quotation comes from an essay entitled "Three Famous African Authors I Knew: R.R.R. Dhlomo", first published in *Inkundla ya Bantu* (August 1946) and reprinted in *English in Africa* 2.1 (1975): 9-12.

¹³ H.I.E. Dhlomo describes the policy of *Sjambok* as being "to fight evil and corruption in the life of the community" – and he adds that "it recognised neither class, colour nor rank" ("Three Famous African Authors" 9).

¹⁴ Here the obvious comparison is to Abrahams' *Mine Boy*; arguably, Dhlomo's representation of mining conditions is more authentic than that of Abrahams.

¹⁵ Ndebele points to this feature of Dhlomo's short stories in his brief comments on Dhlomo in his essay, "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary" (39). He attempts to subsume Dhlomo's stories into his overall view of black South African writing as revealing a history of "spectacular representation".

usually absent, and the stories often have dramatically effective openings. “Fateful Orders” begins:

“You black nigger! Wena tola lo sjambok, sebenza!”
 “Ya, ’nkosi,” whimpered the native, trembling with fear and eyeing the ominous hole with marked horror.
 “Kick him, Boss Boy.” Boss boy responded greedily. (13)

This exposes the racially structured power relations which position the black worker as a helpless (and terrified) subordinate with little option but to obey – even when he believes that the order may lead to his death. One element in this regime of control is conveyed by the “Boss Jack’s” use of *fanakalo* – a bastardised form of Zulu developed on the mines for the purpose of communicating instructions to black mineworkers. The devolution of authority through a system of intermediaries (“Boss Boys”, “Indunas”, “Police boys”) is demonstrated by the instruction to the (unnamed) “Boss Boy” to discipline the reluctant mineworker. The story clearly depicts what Couzens calls “a repressive hierarchy created through a system of ‘collaborators’” (“Introduction” 2). The vicious and corrupt nature of the system is demonstrated in “The Dog Killers”: when word gets out that the miners’ dogs (which they keep as pets in the compound) are all to be killed, Jama runs to Mlungu, the “native *induna*”, in the hope of getting him to intercede. What follows is, in Skikna’s words, a “grotesque parody” of the tribesman’s traditional obeisance to his chief or headman (193):

Hurriedly he changed his wet sacks and ran towards Mlungu’s room. He found him surrounded by his police boys.
 “*Nkosi*,” Jama saluted.
 “*Ya . . . ini?*” barked a police boy.
 “I have come my father, *induna*, about my dog, *nkos*’.”
 “Your dog? What about it?” asked Mlungu.
 “I hear that there is going to be killing of dogs again.”
 “Ya, all the bloody dogs will be killed tomorrow by order of the Big One.”
 “Father, can’t you save mine, please, wailed Jama. “It troubles no one, father. I care for it.”
 “Get away, you!” shouted Mlungu’s chief police boy. “Why do you keep dogs in the compound, *hi*? You run to *induna* now, eh? When did you ever put something in Baba’s hands when you get your pay? Your dog will die with the others, fool. *Hamba-ke! Voetsak!*” (26)

While the brevity of Dhlomo’s stories may at times suggest the stark outlines that Ndebele attributes to the spectacular, in my view his stories are more interesting and more nuanced than Ndebele’s account suggests.

The *induna*'s name, Mlungu, stands for "umlungu" ("white man") – suggesting that he simply functions as an extension of the white man's authority. Traditionally, the *induna* would acknowledge a duty of care and responsibility to those below him, and in turn would be treated with respect. Here there is no evidence of such a relationship: Jama's attempt to invoke the responsibility of care through his use of the terms "nkosi", "induna" and "father" fails. The mine manager is referred to as "the Big One", which recalls the traditional Zulu word for God, *uNkulunkulu* (the Great One). The Manager may, it is implied, exercise his authority from a distance, but as the ultimate authority his commands cannot be questioned. In the end, Jama's attempts to rescue his dog result in his own death at the hands (or the boots) of one of the "police boys": he has himself been treated no better than a dog.

Dhlomo's *Sjambok* stories deserve recognition as an early example of "protest" writing. They are indictments of a brutal and corrupt system, but the protest is implicit, rather than overt. It is instructive – by way of comparison – to turn to the entirely misleading description of conditions on the mines presented in the pages of *Umteteli wa Bantu*, a newspaper established and financed by the Chamber of Mines. An article in 1928 attempts to reassure the relatives of miners by describing the mine compound in glowing terms:

Outside of this room, instead of a bleak barrack square you will find lawns and gardens and trees under which your menfolk can recline in off-duty hours. . . . You will see from this brief outline that a Compound is really synonymous with communal living on modern, up-to-date lines – and not a Victorian barrack room square. (18 February 1928; quoted by Couzens, "Social Ethos of Black Writing" 74)

"The Death of Masaba" illustrates the relative subtlety with which the protest is sometimes registered. The story opens with a group of miners sitting around their brazier discussing the case of Masaba, a miner who is new to the work and keeps fainting. One of them speculates that there was a mistake on his ticket: "It was not stamped *ten days light underground work*" (14). The others ridicule the idea that this was a mistake: "'Didn't Boss Tom say 'there are lots of Kaffirs in the compound'? If one dies . . . the Government will bring more'" (14) The story demonstrates that black life is seen as expendable. The narrator explains what has led these men to seek work on the mines, in spite of knowing about the "terrible accidents" that happen underground: "Their only hope was that the always-wise white people would be true

to them and treat them well: safeguard them from underground dangers, and work them as people with equal feelings though their skins were black” (14). In context, this is ironic: the story juxtaposes their hopes with the cruel and inhumane treatment which they actually receive. When the “Boss Boy” tries to explain that Masaba is not yet ready for hard work, the reaction is one of incredulity: “Boss Tom was greatly surprised that a ‘Kaffir’ could not do the job for which he was solely created . . . the handling of a shovel” (15). The reader registers the routine use of the abusive term “Kaffir” to refer to black people, as well as the deep-seated nature of the racist assumptions on display here – one instance of way in which the ideology of racial capitalism interpellates its subjects. All this is suggested without recourse to explicit commentary. When Masaba dies, after fainting and hitting his head on a piece of rock, an inquiry is held and “Boss Tom” is found guilty for not first putting Masaba on light duty. While this verdict may seem to partly exonerate the system, the final word comes from Masaba’s fellow workers, who regard his death as tantamount to murder, and repeat Boss Tom’s comment to Stimela, the “Boss Boy”: “There are many kaffirs in the compound” (16). In spite of its brevity and its simple structure, the story exposes the impersonality and inhumanity of a system which regards black lives as expendable.

Two further stories, “Juwawa” and “Murder on the Mine Dumps”, illustrate the forms that resistance to these conditions could take. In “Juwawa” an apparent “accident” underground results in the death of the white shift boss. Suspicion falls on Juwawa, who has frequently been assaulted by his “boss”, but nothing can be proved. The story seems to bear out the earlier words of Raikes, the Chief Surveyor: “Never, if it possibly can be avoided, HIT ANY OF YOUR OWN BOYS; hit any one else’s if you like, but not your own” (29 ; original capitalisation).

The opening paragraphs of the story effectively capture the register and idiom of the group of white surveyors relaxing in their office during a lunch break. Here is the Chief Surveyor:

“You never can tell what may happen underground. One minute a place looks safe as a house, the next the darned thing is clattering about your ears – if you aren’t killed, you are buried alive, so either way you get it in the neck! If I could afford it, I’d chuck mining tomorrow and start a poultry farm” (28-29).

Raikes expresses his disapproval of Garwin's conduct as follows: "Say, Alf, you're a pal of his, what's this I hear of Garwin knocking his boys about? I haven't said anything to him yet as I want to be sure. What's the trouble?" (29). The informal language and colloquial idiom recall the atmosphere of a gentleman's club, where certain things are "not done". Dhlomo's success in capturing their manner of speech could be seen as an example not just of mimesis, but of "mimicry", and, as Bhabha has pointed out, "mimicry" is close to mockery.¹⁶

On the other hand, this story also represents the "shangaan Witchdoctor" (whom Juwawa consults) in terms which recall the stereotypes of colonialist fiction: "The old man reached forth a skinny, wrinkled hand A thin smile came fleeting to the lips of the wizard" (29). Is Dhlomo pandering to his audience (the mainly white readers of *Sjambok*) – or is this a function, perhaps, of his own (Christian) discomfort with "heathen" practices? The term "savage" (applied to Juwawa at the end of the story) may suggest the latter. While these stories protest against an inhumane system, they also reflect Dhlomo's ambivalent position: as a "progressive" African he wants to criticize, but without alienating his (mainly white) readers, or seeming to condone Juwawa's pursuit of revenge.

Resistance seems to take a more politicised form in "Murder on the Mine Dumps". Here a group of miners, led by Sipepo, meets secretly at night to discuss future criminal activities – and to plan for a possible day when they will rise up against their "exploiters". Sipepo repeats slogans ("down with tools"; "to hell with our exploiters – the capitalists" (34)) from speeches he has heard at political meetings. The narrator, however, is clearly dismayed by what goes on at these "foolish meetings" where there is talk about "burning passes and refusing to work" (34). Sipepo is deliberately represented in an unsympathetic light: he orders the death of one of the group whom he suspects of being an informer, and the other members are too afraid of him to rescue their condemned fellow miner. As a final touch, the story ends with Sipepo laughing and drawing on his "dagga-filled pipe" (35).

In these stories Dhlomo finds himself in an equivocal position: his respect for the rule of law and his belief that conditions for black people will gradually improve lead him to condemn what could be seen as subversive or extremist behaviour. While

¹⁶ In "Of Mimicry and Men", Bhabha observes that "mimicry" can shade into "mockery", where "the reforming, civilising mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double" (*Location of Culture* 86).

the stories expose brutal and exploitative conditions, they also suggest faith in the good will of those in authority, and their capacity for fair play. Generally, whites are not represented as brutes or monsters. Raikes (in “Juwawa”) seems uncomfortable with abusive behaviour (at least when it threatens his or others’ safety), and “Boss Maningicheek” in “A Mine Tragedy”, is humanised through the interior monologue which reveals him as a loving father (38). (On the other hand his negligence – or his concern for his own safety – leads to the death of his “cheesa boy”.) Dhlomo’s faith in the capacity of those in authority to act fairly is suggested again here when the case is referred for further investigation and possible legal action.

A second group of stories deals with the perils of urban life, the central theme of *An African Tragedy*. “Skokiaan”¹⁷ explores the situation of a woman who has lost her husband and makes a living in Prospect Township by brewing skokiaan. Here Dhlomo presents his material dramatically, avoiding the authorial commentary that pervades *An African Tragedy*. The daughter’s interactions with her mother reveal her as innocent and trusting, but her sense of right and wrong is tested when the mother urges her to “make [herself] agreeable” to the men who are her customers. In allegorical terms, avarice is represented by the mother, and modesty and virtue by the daughter, Nomiti. However, the situation is represented in such a way as to complicate simple moral judgements:

“I am now old, my child, Nomiti.” The voice of the old woman trembled. “If only I could get a few coins, I would return to Natal and die peacefully. Help me, my child. Help me. My knees are now loose. I haven’t even enough strength to stand.”

Then she cried bitterly indeed. She cried until the heart of Nomiti was full of tears. “To be sure this is my mother. Dare I forsake mother when she is getting so old? What is my will if it is compared with mother’s health?” (17)

Nomiti’s concern for her mother’s well-being leads to her involvement with James, “a detective informer” (17). Predictably, she falls pregnant; when she learns that James is in fact married, and is about to leave and join his wife, she stabs and kills him. The story ends with her being brought before the court. Questioned by the Prosecutor, she buries her face in her hands and cries out: ““My God. You know why I did this”” (18). Her lawyer outlines the circumstances which led her to commit the crime, and the story ends without making the verdict known. Implicitly, the reader is prompted to

make his or her own judgement – and this is not as straightforward as it might seem. Nomiti's appeal is to God (the ultimate court of appeal) and her words imply a belief in her own innocence. What might have been a simple cautionary tale in the mode of *An African Tragedy* is humanised; sympathy rather than judgement is evoked.

“The Sins of the Fathers” is described by Black in an editor's note as “a vivid picture of Native life in the slums of Johannesburg” (19). The story's title is also the title of one of the chapters in *An African Tragedy*, and the narrative mode here is much closer to that of the earlier novel. The opening lines present an apparently desperate daughter, Milia, who “weeps as only an erring woman can weep” (19). The narrative then moves back in time to the marriage between Milia and Masosha, described as “a steady young man with a promising future” (19). This immediately activates the allegorical stereotype (compare the description of Robert Zulu in *An African Tragedy*). In this case, however, it is Milia who is at fault: after her marriage, she had refused to give up her previous lover: “Like most of these dancing native girls, she had thought it too slow and childish to have one lover” (19). “Dancing girls” are of course closely associated with *marabi* and shebeen culture, and with the attractions of the “fast life”. To make matters worse, the other lover is “a Blantyre” (a Malawian) – a term which reflects the prejudice of the time against “foreign natives”.¹⁸ Eventually the husband discovers his wife and her lover *in flagrante*. He punishes her with regular beatings, takes to drink, and finally brings a lover back to the house. Milia pleads in vain for forgiveness. The story ends where it began, with Milia's mother pleading with her to leave her husband. (At this point we discover that history is in fact repeating itself: Milia's mother had also taken more than one lover.) Here the story is little more than a vehicle for communicating a moral message. It does, however, anticipate Can Themba's story, “The Suit”, a much more nuanced and powerful exploration of the consequences of marital infidelity.

From 1935 Dhlomo took over the editing of the women's section of *Bantu World*, and this results in a third group of stories which explore “women's issues”. The fact that he would do this indicates the lack of women reporters (journalism being

¹⁷ The name given to an illegal home-brewed liquor made primarily from sugar, yeast and water.

¹⁸ “Blantynes” feature in a scene in *An African Tragedy* involving a game of cards with three “Blantynes” and a “Xosa”. The Xosa is stabbed by one of the Blantynes, and Robert flees, fearing that the murder will be pinned on him.. Words like “fiendish” and “savage” are applied to the “Blantyre” who commits the murder (16-19). There was in fact a campaign in 1928 to have the “Blantynes” expelled from South Africa because they were competing for jobs with South African blacks (Couzens, “Social Ethos of Black Writing”, 70).

in effect a male domain), but it also reflects the patriarchal norm that men (fathers, husbands) should supply guidance and instruction.¹⁹ The assumption was that women, as wives and mothers, needed to absorb the norms and values associated with “decent”, middle-class, Christian life. This insistence relates directly to anxieties about the effects of urbanisation, the *marabi* culture, beer-brewing and the activities of “dancing girls” (like Milia in “The Sins of the Father”). Writing in *Ilanga Lase Natal* in 1936, R.R.R. Dhlomo warned against the dangers of township halls, where the air is not “conducive to pure thoughts and desires”. He went on to quote the lyrics of the popular foxtrot song: “If you wish to keep your wife at home, never teach her to dance” (19 March 1936; quoted by Ballantine 83).

Dhlomo must have had some exposure to the popular women’s fiction of the time. In “Janet and her Past”, Janet’s apparently idyllic married life is threatened by the fact that she has “a guilty secret”: while working as a domestic servant in Yeoville, she had an affair with a superficially charming man (52). She discovers that he is in fact “one of Johannesburg’s notorious men” – and manages to leave him. He has now located her, and threatens to reveal all to her husband. The denouement comes one Sunday morning when a car pulls up, and Janet discovers that in fact her husband knows all about her past. He “squares his shoulders” when he hears the knock at the door and reassures his trembling wife: “I want to speak personally to this confounded snake. He thinks I don’t know you were deceived into loving him” (54). Jerry’s behaviour is composed and considerate, but he speaks from a position of assumed superiority: “If there is anything that really worries you, dear, please let me know” (52). The clichéd diction, superficial characterisation and stock situation are, of course, characteristic of the genre.

“Maggie’s Married Life” presents another stock situation: here the gloss has worn off the marriage, and Maggie has begun to resent the housework and childminding which occupies her all day. “Married life is not a bed of roses”, she tells her friend Rose. Rose (the friend who gives good counsel) warns Maggie that unless she mends her ways she may lose her husband: “When a man does not find in his wife and home a loving and cheerful welcome, he goes out and looks for it elsewhere” (55).

¹⁹ The practice continued into the 1950s, when the male journalists on *Drum* were regular contributors to the women’s section, even answering reader’s letters in the “Dear Dolly” column. They also contributed stories under a female pseudonym.

These are among the slightest of Dhlomo's short stories: they follow a formulaic pattern, and seem to endorse stereotypical gender roles. They do, however, anticipate the kind of stories which journalists like Can Themba were prepared to write for *Drum* in the 1950s: stories like "Forbidden Love" (November 1955) and "Passionate Stranger" (March 1953) also follow the conventions of popular romance, and are formulaic in their style and structure.²⁰

A fourth group of stories reveals the tensions between Dhlomo's position as a "progressive" African and a practising Christian, and his interest in and respect for traditional Zulu culture. His brother H.I.E. Dhlomo tells us that in spite of their parents' migration to Johannesburg, "the family adhered to its Zulu traditions and language". According to Herbert, although "city-bred", Dhlomo retained "real and living links with his rural background" ("Three Famous African Authors" (10)). These links were reinforced when Dhlomo moved to Natal in the early 1930s to take up a position as assistant editor on *Ilanga Lase Natal*.²¹ His interest in Zulu history and culture led him to write a series of historical novels in Zulu, only two of which had been published by 1946, when Herbert wrote his tribute to his brother. Their titles, as listed by his brother, were *uDingana*, *uShaka*, *uMpande*, *Izikhali zaNamuhla* and *Ukwazi Kuyathuthukisa* ("Three Famous African Authors" 11).

Dhlomo's stories on traditional themes focus on religion, witchcraft and superstition, but do not adopt a consistent position.²² The subject of "Zulu Christian Science" (reprinted in *Bantu World* in 1934) is a husband's refusal to allow medical doctors to treat his wife: he belongs to a Christian sect which believes in healing by prayer. The intervention of the "shepherd and his flock", who are transported into a "religious frenzy" (25), is described in detail. The narrator does not comment explicitly on the proceedings, but the story implies a mistrust of religious fanaticism.

The counterpart to this story is "The Herbalist". Here the husband, Zizwe, refuses to allow the "white doctor" to continue to treat their child. He insists on calling Duma (an *inyanga*) and blames their child's illness on their failure to follow the rite of *ukugweba* (glossed as "bleeding by means of a reed") when he was born. His intolerant and abusive treatment of his wife and refusal to heed her pleas are

²⁰ These stories are republished in *The World of Can Themba* (1985).

²¹ (After working for *Bantu World* for ten years (from 1933 to 1943) he returned to *Ilanga* as editor. When his brother joined him on *Ilanga* six months later, Rolfes took responsibility for the Zulu section of the paper.)

calculated to alienate the reader's sympathy. The story ends with the child's death, and implies that one should rather place one's faith in Western medicine. As with the previous story, however, there is no overt authorial commentary.

"*Ukugweba*" (serialised in *Bantu World* in August 1932) refers to the same "Cruel Custom . . . Still Widely Practised Among the Bantu" (39; the quotation forms the subheading of the story). The story opens with the following comment: "Superstitious beliefs die hard. The twentieth century finds most Natives, the educated as well as the ignorant, still clinging to the rite of '*Ukugweba*'" (40). Here the story is coded in terms of a master-narrative of progress and enlightenment (central to missionary discourse). At one point the narrator slips into the first person and addresses the readers directly: "To prove this claim, I will quote the actual words of a modern witchdoctor . . ." (40). Dhlomo seems to alternate between the modes of the journalistic report and the short story. The story is intended to criticize the ritual of "*ukugcaba*" (practiced by "witchdoctors") and begins by describing what sounds like an actual event: "A young Zulu man was once brought before his chief on a charge of murder" (40). While blame is placed on the father, who is a "witchdoctor", and on the ritual of *ukugcaba*, the story at the same time implicitly endorses the traditional belief system by suggesting that a solution to the problem (the "evil" of witchcraft) should have been sought by consulting Duma, the *isanusi*.²³

A significant shift in terms of perspective and narrative style occurs with "Death of Manembe" (*Bantu World* 24 June 1933). Here the story is told by "Maweni" (it is assumed that the reader knows who he is), and we see Dhlomo adopting the conventions and style of traditional oral narrative:

There are many strange things which happened in this world which, if we spoke about them today, we would be called mad men. Mawemi was speaking. When they took place those days, we were not surprised, for we lived in troublous times.

For instance, the strange events which took place before the death of Manembe of the clan of Gcwensa, who would believe them now?

Manembe was the greatest inyanga during the reign of Cetshwayo. The powers of his medicines were well-known throughout the land. . . .

²² The first two stories, "Zulu Christian Science" and "The Herbalist", were both published in *Sjambok* in 1930; the others were published in *Bantu World* between 1932 and 1934.

²³ The fact that the narrator uses the terms "witchdoctor" and "*isanusi*" as though they are equivalents somewhat undercuts the reliability of the narrative. An *isangoma* (often translated as "witchdoctor") is one who diagnoses a problem and either supplies a cure or refers the patient to a herbalist. An *isanusi* is a diviner who can see into the past, present and the future. An *umthakathi* is a wizard or witch. I am grateful to my colleague, Professor Zulu, for his assistance in clarifying the use of these terms.

The narrator's audience shares the same cultural and historical frame of reference. Narrative "markers" strengthen the sense that this is an oral narrative: "Now Manembe had a son One day Ngulungulwana got ill and died. . . . Now at this period happened a series of miracles" (49). This is reinforced by direct translation from isiZulu: "'Let not the voice of the king fall down,' said Manembe" (49). The story ends with the oral narrator refusing to express a personal opinion:

They say the death of Manembe brought evil times in the reign of the king, concluded Maweni. We cannot say anything to this, for there are many things which we cannot explain in the world. (50)

Although written in English, the story positions the reader within the world of Zulu culture and history – and in this respect it probably resembles Dhlomo's sequence of novels in isiZulu. The shifting perspectives and different narrative styles adopted by the narrators in this group of stories suggests Dhlomo's ambivalent relationship to traditional Zulu culture: he seems to be caught between the more sceptical, "rational" attitudes of Western modernity and the norms and values of traditional Zulu society. As an educated, "progressive" African, Dhlomo is to some extent distanced from his traditional culture – but he also attempts in various ways to reconcile the two belief systems. One way of resolving this dilemma may have been to adopt the expository style of the objective reporter. This is what he does in "Dumela Defies Lightning" (51-52), a story which describes traditional beliefs regarding protection from lightning in an apparently neutral manner.

ENGLISH

Dhlomo's decision to write the short stories and *An African Tragedy* in English has obvious implications and consequences. As the language of the coloniser, English came to be seen as synonymous with education and "progress" and "civilisation". In the colonial situation English acquires a particular status and prestige. Ngugi observes, for example, that in Kenya English was "more than just a language It was *the* language, and all other languages had to bow before it in deference" (11). In the South African context, C.L.S. Nyembezi makes the following comment in relation to Dhlomo's brother Herbert:

H.I.E. Dhlomo lived at a time when to be educated was to know English and to write in English, and this was a status . . . a symbol, and many people didn't think that their own mother-tongue was a vehicle of literature. So they tended to write in English.

(quoted in Skikna 122)

The advantages of opting for English were considerable. Writing in *Ilanga Lase Natal* in 1953, H.I.E. Dhlomo sums these up as follows.

An African who writes successfully in the medium of English kills many birds with one stone. He proves that Africans can rise to world standards. He gets an international reputation. He speaks to a wider audience. He receives better financial returns. There are no tribal, religious, and other restrictions. He is not encouraging tribalism. The argument is that he can show the African genius just as well in writing in English . . . (“Reflections on a Literary Competition” 31 October 1953; quoted by Couzens, *New African* 316)

Not surprisingly, members of the African elite, like the Dhlomo brothers, felt that a considerable burden rested on them. According to H.I.E. Dhlomo,

The task of the educated African is a great one. He has to interpret African culture to the world, graft the old to the new, lead his people, be the interpreter between black and white. On him lies the burden to prove that the African is as good as anyone else in all the walks of life. (“Busy Bee”, *Ilanga Lase Natal* 5 November 1949; quoted by Couzens, *New African* 273)

Clearly, he can only be an “interpreter” if he uses the medium of English.²⁴ At the same time, however, English is of course “culturally loaded”: as Fanon and others have pointed out, “To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture” (*Black Skin, White Masks* 38). In South Africa in the early years of the century, whichever mission institution he or she attended, the African scholar would assimilate, along with the language, an ethos and a set of assumptions that helped mould the expectations and outlook of a generation. To be colonised is, in a very real sense, to assimilate the colonial language and learn to use it for discursive and expressive purposes. Couzens sums this up as follows:

²⁴ One is inevitably reminded here of Macaulay’s famous “Minute on Indian Education”, in which he speaks of forming a class to act as “interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (430).

What is crucial to realise, however, is that the blacks who attended the mission schools of the 1920s were largely subjected to an ideology of trusteeship, slow evolution, but with inevitable progress towards eventual assimilation. There may be temporary setbacks to this hope, it may take a long time, but there was little doubt among the black elite about their final acceptance into a community based on “civilised standards”, and the ultimate good faith of the whites was accepted. (Couzens, *New African* 50)

More recently de Kock has drawn on poststructuralist and postcolonial theory to examine the role of English as a “master discourse” in the colonial world of nineteenth century South Africa. He focuses in particular on “missionary discourse” (as the principal constituent of this larger discourse) and its role in constituting the subjectivity and self-apprehension of mission-educated Africans (*Civilising Barbarians* 19, 195). Elsewhere he quotes with approval Ndebele’s comment that “English . . . cannot be considered an innocent language” and concurs with Ndebele’s view that English functions as “the carrier of a range of social perceptions, attitudes and goals” (“English and Social Change” 11).

Dhlomo’s writings in English help to illustrate these general points. Stylistically and ideologically, the imprint of mission-school education and the influence of the mission press is most transparent in *An African Tragedy*. It fits the general account of mission-press publications given by Van Wyk Smith:

The mission endeavour undoubtedly provided encouragement and opportunity for writing and publication that would not otherwise have existed, but their informing ideology and motivation (see for instance the writings of R.H.W. Shepherd, the moving spirit at Lovedale) ensured that the early products of most presses were cast entirely within the idiom and sentiments that contemporary religious piety, literary decorum, and political propriety demanded.

(*Grounds of Contest* 38).

An African Tragedy reflects missionary discourse by constructing a reductive allegorical scheme in terms of which Robert Zulu is presented with a stark choice – between good and evil, civility and savagery, sobriety and dissipation, virtue and depravity, etc. The influence of Lovedale and missionary tutelage is also evident in H.I.E. Dhlomo’s early play, *The Girl Who Killed to Save*, which advances the remarkable thesis that the cattle-killing of 1856-1857, inspired by the prophecies of Nongqawuse, was in fact providential: by destroying the basis of the traditional

economy of the Xhosa, it hastened their dependence on the colony and their conversion to Christianity.

R.R.R. Dhlomo's moderation, his mistrust of political "agitation", his belief in the goodwill of those in authority, and his hope that fairness will prevail find expression in the group of stories dealing with conditions on the mines. These stories were initially published in *Sjambok*, and would have been addressed to a predominantly white readership. On the other hand, Dhlomo's treatment of Zulu culture and tradition in the stories dealing with witchcraft and superstition reveals some ambivalence or inconsistency. However, in at least two of the stories there is a move towards a representing Zulu society either more objectively ("Dumela Defies Lightning") or more sympathetically ("Death of Manembe"). In the latter story, by adopting the style and conventions of oral narrative, the implied author inhabits the traditional world view of the Zulu – and in this way eludes the grasp of missionary discourse. A characteristic of missionary discourse is of course its inability to appreciate alterity – hence its designation of traditional beliefs and practices as "heathen" or "primitive" or "backward" or "evil". The fact that during this period Dhlomo writes a series of historical novels in isiZulu suggests a move towards affirming his indigenous culture, thereby resisting the hegemony of English.

Dhlomo's role as "translator" raises a central issue, and bears out Gray's contention that in a multi-lingual, multi-cultural heterogeneous society like South Africa, the writer exists "at any of several boundaries (not at the centre of one self-enclosed group); his or her act of making literature is part of transferring data across that boundary, from one audience to another – an act which in the broadest sense may be termed 'translation'" ("Some Problems of Writing Historiography" 20-21).²⁵ In Dhlomo's case his fictional and journalistic writing is published through very different outlets (Lovedale Press, *Sjambok*, *Bantu World*, and *Ilanga Lase Natal*),²⁶ each with rather different audiences in terms of language, class, region and ethnic identification) and he employs two major South African languages, one (English) which is accessible in some measure to all cultural groups in this country (but limited of course to those with some formal education), and one (isiZulu) which is regionally and culturally specific (but limited to those with some degree of literacy). His writing

²⁵ Gray's point is not just a theoretical observation: it arises from his sustained hands-on attempt to grapple with the problems of literary historiography in Southern Africa over a number of years.

²⁶ The publisher of the historical novels, written in isiZulu, was Shuter and Shooter.

career demonstrates that writers are not hermetically sealed within particular racially or culturally defined groups. As Gray puts it, in South Africa the writer (particularly, I would argue the writer who uses English) “can only be a syncretist and hybridiser” (“Some Problems of Writing Historiography” 20).

STYLE

Finally, to return to a more obviously “literary” question, the question of style. Van Wyk Smith, in his discussion of early black writing in English, points to a discrepancy between what he calls “the evident sincerity of intention and feeling on the one hand, and the poverty of register on the other” (*Grounds of Contest* 40). Is it enough, he asks, to explain away “the wooden phraseology” by referring to the conditions of production, or by making claims based on the writing’s socio-political significance? (He also suggests that there is little evidence of the influence of the conventions of oral literature on early black writing in English.) While the reader of *An African Tragedy* may feel the force of these remarks, I have tried to show that they do not apply uniformly to Dhlomo’s work. It is instructive to read Skikna’s discussion of Dhlomo’s work, and to consider what he says about the influence of Zulu idiom and expression on the Dhlomo’s use of English. Here is a passage from “The Sins of the Fathers”, followed by Skikna’s commentary.

“My life is now dead. O, why was I born to be troubled so? Mother, why did you not advise and help me about these strange feelings of love?”

Milia turned to the mother, but her mother was passing through a phase of her past life. The Zulu proverb which says: “*Injalo impuma edunjini*” (“a child follows her parents’ footsteps”) was being literally verified. Milia’s mother also had in her past life more than one lover at a time, with the result that when Milia came to this world, no father acknowledged her. Each man when approached, shrugged his shoulders and said: “How can she know, we were many.”

(“The Sins of the Father” 21)

The use of the continuous passive past tense in the words “was being literally verified” indicates the significance of the past for the present. The Zulu proverb also repeats the idea. In this passage, Dhlomo uses Zulu idiom effectively to convey a sense of immediacy and realism. Examples are “My life is now *dead*”, “why did you not help me *about*”, “When Milia came to this world”, “we were many”, and the Zulu proverb. The introduction of a second language into this passage reveals a complex cultural consciousness in that it postulates two

worlds whose norms Milia must accept, the world of traditional Zulu society, and the modern urban world
(Skikna 181)

Clearly, a non-Zulu speaker may not register the ways in which apparent departures or lapses from standard English may in fact reflect the influence of the African language. Similarly, what might seem to one reader to be inadequately realised characterisation, or the one-dimensional characterisation of allegory, may to a reader familiar with folk narrative suggest the flattening of character common in such stories. Thus Skikna argues that *An African Tragedy* shows the influence of folk narrative, where detail is used sparingly and characters are “reduced to the flat ones of the folktale” (164). He cites Dhlomo’s familiarity with oral storytelling (via his mother) and argues that just as oral tales are intended to convey a lesson, so too are Dhlomo’s English narratives (165). At the same time, however, he accepts that the use of flat characters “verges on the allegorical” and argues that Dhlomo “introduces elements of the morality play into his works” (165). He goes so far as to suggest that *An African Tragedy* can be seen as “a rewriting of *Pilgrim’s Progress*” (167). In this view, then, *An African Tragedy* incorporates elements from both the traditional folk narrative and the allegory in order to communicate a didactic message. The ideal reader of these stories would be fluent in both English and Zulu, and familiar with the conventions of Western literature as well as African folk-narrative. Of course, given the historically divided nature of South African society, such “ideal readers” are few and far between. The extract from “The Sins of the Father” reveals that, as Nkosi puts it, “there are ‘borders’ to be crossed in any process of communication in South Africa” (“Constructing the Cross-Border’ Reader” 42). Here these “borders” are inscribed textually in the inflection of English idiom and usage by the mother tongue, and in the insertion of a Zulu proverb (with translation), thus bringing two disparate worlds and value systems into intimate contact. Nkosi’s “cross-border reader” is another, more descriptive, term for the hypothetical “ideal reader” constructed by the text.

CHAPTER 3: *DRUM*, SOPHIATOWN AND THE FIFTIES

Although the *Drum* writers have their antecedents in the previous generation of writers and journalists, they were nevertheless conscious of themselves as innovators and groundbreakers. Lewis Nkosi begins his seminal essay, “The Fabulous Decade: The Fifties”, by arguing that every generation needs to distance itself from its predecessors:

It is the indescribable vanity of every generation to believe that its young men and women are somewhat more beautiful, more plausible, certainly more perceptive and courageous than their elders, who are always assumed to have failed their young.

(Home and Exile 3)

Even from this distance, the writers of the 1950s do seem to differ significantly from their predecessors. This is partly a matter of temperament and outlook (a new brashness and self-assertiveness, a new willingness to transgress boundaries), partly a matter of style and tone (a sophisticated irreverence, a willingness to defy authority) and partly the confident assertion of a new modern urban identity and lifestyle. The exemplars of this new lifestyle were the *Drum* journalists themselves – Henry Nxumalo, Can Themba, Bloke Modisane, Todd Matshikiza, Casey Motsisi, Lewis Nkosi, Nat Nakasa and company. They had little patience with the more cautious approach of their elders, with their respect for the law and with their belief that ultimately – if one were polite and persistent enough – the barriers would come down.¹

We, the young, were blamed of course, not only for having defected from the time-tested morality of the tribe but were also sharply reprimanded for refusing *at least* to substitute a Christian morality in its place. . . . We were accused of being irresponsible, cynical, pleasure-loving, world-weary and old before our time. . . .

(Home and Exile 4)

¹ Luthuli writes in his autobiography, *Let My People Go* (1962): “In the course of Congress history, no civilised method of attempting to get recognition and redress has been neglected. But perhaps reason, argument, and the appeal of humane values and democratic principles are things which most South Africans cannot understand. They have turned a deaf ear.” (82)

For many of these writers, the attitudes which they had come to reject were epitomised by the character of the Rev. Stephen Kumalo in Alan Paton's *Cry, The Beloved Country* (1948) – “an embodiment of all the pieties, trepidations and humilities we the young had begun to despise with such a consuming passion” (*Home and Exile* 4). Conversely, the fictional character who most closely reflects their attitudes and lifestyle is Steven Sitole (modelled in part on Henry Nxumalo and/or Can Themba) in Gordimer's *A World of Strangers* (1958). Although he resists political involvement, Steven in a sense runs his own personal one-man defiance campaign: his whole life is “an endless outwitting of authority” (203). The narrator refers to him as “a new kind of man” (134)² – and the *Drum* writers did indeed see themselves in this light. In Arthur Maimane's words, “We created a new class of black person, a journalist who was respected by tsotsis³ and respectable people alike” (*Sophiatown Speaks* 50). They seem to have been able to move with relative ease between seemingly disparate worlds. They represent a generation rooted in and shaped by the city and their links with any putative “homeland” were often almost non-existent. Nakasa and Themba both gave the impression of speaking only English – although Themba was of course well-versed in the *tsotsitaal* that was the argot of the streets.⁴ Nakasa describes himself as “inescapably a part of the city slums, the factory machines, and our beloved shebeens” (159). They were articulators of a new identity, spokespersons for a new, street-wise generation who wholeheartedly embraced the culture and lifestyle of the townships – a culture and lifestyle that found its fullest expression in the Sophiatown of the 1940s and 1950s.

SOPHIATOWN

By now the actual, historical Sophiatown has almost disappeared under the weight of myth, legend, fantasy and fiction that has accumulated around it. It now functions as a signifier for whatever was daring, exciting, experimental, culturally

² Nkosi regards Steven Sitole as a representative figure: “But Steven Sitole, especially in Sophiatown, is a physical and mental fact. I hear him every now and again at mixed parties . . . I listen to him every weekend in shebeens . . .” (“Sophiatown has become a state of mind” (5)).

³ The word was first used in the 1940s to refer to “a young black gangster of hoodlum who affected a particular style of language and flashy dress” (*Dictionary of South African English* 743). It is believed to derive from the term “zoot suit”. The term “tsotsi-taal” originated at around the same time, and refers more broadly to “the township argot which is used mainly . . . by black males in various urban centres” (Makhudu 298). An alternative term is “Flaaitaal”.

⁴ Nicol quotes Obed Musi as saying, “I don't think there was ever an occasion where Can spoke a single line in an African language” (179). The same informant refers to Nakasa as “another one who spoke only English” (341).

innovative and defiant; it was, we are repeatedly told, “alive” and “vital”.⁵ It also features as both a historical and symbolic site of resistance to apartheid and the ideology of separate development. Here was an area, about four miles to the west of the centre of Johannesburg, where Africans had freehold rights, and where a variety of people of various ethnic affiliations and class backgrounds (including Chinese and Indians and “coloureds”) coexisted cheek-by-jowl in relative harmony.⁶ The claim most often made for Sophiatown is that it was a community, and that in spite of the poverty, crime and violence, it was regarded with pride by its residents. According to Coplan, “It was an organic community that allowed freedom of action, association and expression available only in freehold areas” (144). As he continues, however, sociological fact slides into the impressionism that helps underpin the Sophiatown “myth”:

A new synthesis of African culture sprang up here, shouting for recognition. Materially poor but intensely social; crime-ridden and violent but neighbourly and self-protective; proud, bursting with music and writing, swaggering with personality, simmering with intellectual and political militance, Sophiatown was a slum of dreams, a battleground of the heart. (144)

Huddlestone’s description of Sophiatown has become a *locus classicus*: for him the very name recalls “Sancta Sophia, Holy Wisdom, and the dreaming city where her temple is built” (89). For Huddlestone, Sophiatown was neither a “slum” nor a “location”:

The word “slum”. . . conjures up immediately a picture of tenement buildings, old and damp, with crumbling stone and dark cellars. . . . In

⁵ Evidence of the continuing fascination with this era is the recent (2004) film *Drum*, directed by Zola Maseko, which was screened for the first time in South Africa at the Sithengi World Cinema Festival held in Cape Town in November 2004. It is a fictionalised version of the life and exploits of legendary *Drum* reporter Henry Nxumalo. The Sithengi Programme describes the film as “a bewitchingly evocative chronicle of South Africa in the 1950s” (12).

⁶ The history of Sophiatown has been researched by Proctor, Lodge, Lebelo and others. The land was originally bought by a Johannesburg businessman, H. Tobiansky, who developed it as a private leasehold township (and named it after his late wife, Sophia). It was established in 1905, consisted of 1694 small stands, and by 1912 was home to a mixed population of white and black owners. The adjacent townships of Martindale and Newclare were established in 1905 and 1912 respectively. In 1921 the combined population of Martindale and Sophiatown consisted of 557 whites, 1457 Africans, 79 Asiatics and 878 coloureds. The population grew rapidly in the 1930s and 1940s, when most stands were converted into yards housing tenants and subtenants, and its middle-class character changed. The combined population of Sophiatown, Martindale and Newclare (the “Western Areas”) grew from 12,000 in 1928 to 26,000 in 1934 to just over 59,000 in 1950 (Proctor 63-65; Lodge 95). Figures for Sophiatown show that from 1937 to 1950 the population increased from 16,669 to 39,186 (Lebelo, “Making of a Tenantry” 18).

that sense Sophiatown is not, and never has been, a slum. Sometimes, looking up at Sophiatown from the Western Native Township, across the main road, I have felt that I was looking at an Italian village somewhere in Umbria. For you do “look up” at Sophiatown, and in the evening light, across the blue-grey haze of smoke from braziers and chimneys, against a saffron sky, you see close-packed, red roofed little houses. You see, in the farthest skyline, the tall and shapely blue-gum trees You see, moving up and down the hilly streets, people in groups: people with colourful clothes: people who, when you come up to them, are children playing, dancing and standing round the braziers. And above it all you see the Church of Christ the King, its tower visible north, south, east and west, riding like a great ship at anchor upon the grey and golden waves of the town beneath. In the evening, towards the early South African sunset, there is very little of the slum about Sophiatown. It is a human dwelling place.

(92)

This lyrical evocation depends on the angle of observation (from the outside) and even the time of day (towards evening); it may seem remote from the realities of life in Sophiatown – yet Huddleston was also acutely aware of the overcrowding, poverty, frustration, and the ever-present temptation to turn to crime. He nevertheless celebrates the capacity of ordinary people – Sophiatown’s “unknown heroes and heroines” (97) – to survive and live their lives with dignity, and he affirms his sense of Sophiatown as a community – “a living organism which has grown up through the years, and which has struck its roots deep in this particular place and in this special soil” (101).

Sociological investigation reveals a more complex picture. Proctor accepts that in many respects Sophiatown differed from the “tightly regulated locations” (72) which were being created in the 1930s and 1940s, but points out that Sophiatown’s “freedom” was to some extent an illusion: “It was a black ghetto in the heart of a white city, with a character of its own, it is true, but to an overwhelming degree unfree and moulded by its white mother” (72). Lodge accepts that Sophiatown had many of the features of a ghetto – “poor inhabitants, external ownership of most businesses, little local investment, a high birth rate, indebtedness, and a socially heterodox population with members of different classes forced to live in close proximity to one another” (95). Like Huddleston, however, he argues that the Western Areas were not “locations”: “They were not fenced off, there was no superintendent, nobody had to ask permission to live there, and compared to the geometrically planned municipal location, these densely packed suburbs were very difficult to police” (95).

This “freedom” was, however, also qualified by the fact that most of the inhabitants of Sophiatown were tenants or subtenants living in very crowded and confined conditions in corrugated iron shacks erected in the yards of the standholders.⁷ Landlords would seek to increase profits by cramming as many people as possible into these backyard shacks. As a result, says Proctor, “living conditions were, for the most part, utterly miserable” (74). Even Huddleston refers to Sophiatown’s “dusty, dirty streets . . . its slovenly shops . . . its sprawling unplanned stretches of corrugated-iron roof [and] its foetid and insanitary yards” (100). An entire family might be crowded into a single room, and as many as 80 people might live on a stand (Proctor 74). There was extreme job insecurity,⁸ continual harassment by the police, and tenants who failed to pay their rent could be summarily evicted.

Yet, in spite of these conditions, Sophiatown was a source of pride. It did, Lodge points out, contain two cinemas, twenty churches, seventeen schools, as well as shops, craftsmen, herbalists, shebeens and jazz clubs (95). Miriam Tlali, who grew up there, writes about it in glowing terms in *Muriel at Metropolitan*:

That beloved Sophiatown. As students we used to refer to it proudly as “the centre of the metropolis”. And who could dispute it? The most talented African men and women, from all walks of life – in spite of the hardships they had to encounter – came from Sophiatown. The best musicians, scholars, educationists, singers, artists, doctors, lawyers, clergymen.

(70; quoted by Lodge 95)

That Tlali could speak of it in this way is partly due to her own relatively privileged position: her father was a school headmaster in Sophiatown and part of its small professional class.

In spite of claims that Sophiatown was an “organic community” (Coplan 144; Huddleston 101), there were clearly tensions resulting from the different class interests and origins of, for example, landlords and tenants. This helps to explain the failure of resistance to the forced removal of Sophiatown’s residents, which began in

⁷ A survey in 1950 showed that 82% of the families in Sophiatown were tenants, 14% were subtenants, and only 2% were landlords (Lodge 95). Of the 1708 stands, only 355 were actually owned by Africans – although Proctor suggests that the actual figure might have been higher (some may not yet have taken legal transfer) (Proctor 76).

⁸ Of those in regular employment in 1951, 82% were in working class occupations and most of these were domestic or unskilled workers (Lodge 98).

1955.⁹ In these conditions, where people of all kinds and classes find themselves living cheek-by-jowl, some kind of shared communal awareness is nevertheless bound to develop. According to Gready, “Sophiatown lacked a geography of class. . . . It was possible to live, or create the illusion of living, in all layers of society at once” (141). The view that emerges from interviews conducted by Lodge with former residents is of a place “characterised by mutual aid, interdependence and solidarity” (Lodge 98). Their comments are echoed by the writers and journalists who lived in or frequented Sophiatown. According to Mphahlele, it was a place where ordinary working class people would mix freely with “the highly educated people like the Can Thembas and the Bloke Modisanes and the Arthur Maimanes. There was no stratification and people mixed very well” (*Sophiatown Speaks* 55). For Arthur Maimane, the *Drum* journalists were “a new class of black person . . . accepted by *tsotsis* and respectable people alike” (*Sophiatown Speaks* 50). For Don Mattera, leader of the Vultures, Sophiatown’s most feared youth gang, there was no “rigid separation”:

The fact was that we had one tap, communal tap, for about 200 people – and we had one toilet and we all had to pee. We saw what everyone ate, it was in the same yard. And so the highbrows, the stand-owners, had the houses, and it was us in the shanties at the back. So there was always interaction.

(*Sophiatown Speaks* 14).

Mattera came from a family that was as “cosmopolitan” as Sophiatown itself, and his autobiography gives us a glimpse of the underworld of Sophiatown – “the Kofifi of the *majietas* (city slickers) and of the *moegoies* or *bar-rees* (greenhorns)” (*Memory is the Weapon* 50). He describes the greater part of Sophiatown as “a deplorable sickening slum”¹⁰ – but at the same time acknowledges that Sophiatown “also had its beauty; . . . double-story mansions and quaint cottages stood side by side with rusty wood-and-iron shacks, locked in a fraternal embrace of filth and felony” (*Memory is the Weapon* 74, 75).

The most compelling, textured and psychologically penetrating account of Sophiatown is to be found in the pages of Bloke Modisane’s autobiography, *Blame*

⁹ From 1926 the interests of landlords and standholders were represented by the Non-European Ratepayers’ Association; they were prominent in the Action Committee formed in 1951 and in the Ratepayers’ Association. They were also represented in the local ANC branch, whose chairman in 1955 was Simon Tyeku, a landlord and coal merchant (Lodge 97).

me on History (1963), one of a number of autobiographies written by the *Drum* writers from exile.¹¹ Modisane was born and bred in Sophiatown, and his book is in part a lament for the death of Sophiatown, and in part a psychological study of alienation and displacement, an analysis of the “dry-breast barrenness of being black in white South Africa” (20). Like others, he acknowledges the ugliness of poverty and deprivation, and the ever-present fear of violence and death – but he also affirms that Sophiatown represented home:

Whatever else Sophiatown was, it was home; we made the desert bloom; made alterations; converted half-verandahs into kitchens, decorated the houses and filled them with music. We were house-proud. We took the ugliness of life in a slum and wove a kind of beauty; we established bonds of human relationships which set a pattern of communal living, far richer and more satisfying – materially and spiritually – than any model housing could substitute. The dying of a slum is a community tragedy, everywhere.

(*Blame* 16)

In his review of *The Drum Decade* and *Ten Years of Staffrider*, Maughan-Brown cautions against taking accounts of the quality of Sophiatown life at face value. He is critical of “the impulse towards a nostalgic recreation of the Sophiatown era which seems to be a feature of contemporary South African cultural life” and suggests that we should see what he calls “the pathology of compulsive joyousness” as in part an escape from social circumstances (“The Anthology as Reliquary?” 5, 7). He cites the following description from *Blame me on History*: “Sophiatown was like our nice-time parties or the sound of the penny whistle, a mounting compulsion to joyousness, but always with the hint of pain” (*Blame* 9). The *Drum* writers were in fact clearly aware that this “compulsion to joyousness” was directly related to the pain, insecurity and frustration of life in the ghetto – hence the need to seek consolation or affirmation or escape by living for the moment. The underside to this dangerous, profligate lifestyle was the damage caused by compulsive drinking to so many lives – not least those of the journalists who worked on *Drum*. “The number of *Drum* fellows who were destroyed by liquor boggles the mind,” says Mphahlele: “It was just too many – Todd

¹⁰ He notes that this was due in part to the failure of the Johannesburg City Council to accept responsibility for maintaining it.

¹¹ The first of these, and still the most widely read, is Mphahlele’s *Down Second Avenue* (1959), his by now classic account of growing up in Marabastad, a Pretoria township. It was preceded by Peter Abrahams’ *Tell Freedom* (1954), which was serialised in the pages of *Drum*.

Matshikiza, Nat Nakasa, Bob Gosani, Casey Motsisi” (*Sophiatown Speaks* 58) – and he could of course have added Can Themba to the list. The Sophiatown milieu is, then, crucial to any assessment of the achievements (or in some cases the lack of achievement) of these writers; it was their informing context.

“ANYTHING AMERICAN”

It is no coincidence the Sophiatown’s leading gang was called “the Americans”, for American films, music, fashions and lifestyles permeated the popular culture of Soweto. We can accept as reliable the testimony of Don Mattera, self-confessed murderer, leader of the Vultures, known on the streets as “Don Terror”:

Almost everything we wore or ate was fashioned after American styles. Some gangs and gang members chose the names, habits and mannerisms of film stars such as George Raft, John Garfield and John Wayne, who was nicknamed *Motsamai* (swaggerer). Some fashion shops actually overpriced their clothes on the recommendation of the Americans gang who wanted – and were prepared to pay for – the exclusive privilege of wearing USA imports such as Florsheim, Nunn Bush and Jarman shoes. . . . “Made in the USA” became the sole criterion and any rubbish that carried the USA label was desirable for that alone. And Sophiatown had many shops and tailors – invariably Jewish or Indian owned – that raked in huge profits on the “Made in the USA” craze. Even the traditional African herbalists used brightly painted signs to advertise their USA aphrodisiacs, blood mixtures and lucky charms. And if you rejected the American fad, you would quickly be dubbed *moegoe* or greenhorn.

(*Memory is the Weapon* 75)

The impact of American popular culture on urban black culture in South Africa has been profound. Much of Coplan’s book, *In Township Tonight*, explores this influence and the various forms it took. If one confines oneself just to music, this would include the visits of the Jubilee Singers (in the 1880s and 1890s), the influence of Ragtime (in the 1920s) and jazz (from the 1930s onwards), as well as the impact of minstrel performance tradition.¹² The Merry Blackbirds, founded in the early 1930s and led by Peter Rezant, modelled themselves on Glen Miller’s orchestra, and played ragtime and jazz for white and racially mixed audiences, as well as the more middle-class African clientele who patronised the BMSC or the Inchcape Hall in Sophiatown

(Couzens, *New African* 69). Their rivals were bands like the Rhythm Kings, who Africanised jazz and brought it to a wider township audience, and the Jazz Maniacs, led by Solomon “Zuluboy” Cele, who had started his career as a *marabi* pianist (Coplan 131-132). These bands helped to bring African working-class and middle-class performance cultures together, and bridged the social gap between *marabi* and the more respectable traditions of choral singing and concert and eisteddfod. In effect, Coplan suggests, “black American performance helped to unify urban African culture” (133). Jazz was “at once an instrument of class formation and a means of cultural communication and participation among different classes” (139). It was, in part, their closeness to and familiarity with the jazz and shebeen culture of the 1950s that helped the *Drum* journalists bridge class or ethnic barriers and remain in close touch with ordinary people and the popular culture of their time.¹³ Their exposure to jazz also established a link, at what seems to have been a deep, intuitive level, with the African-American experience. Here is Mphahlele’s recollection (from exile in the United States) of the South African urban experience, as mediated by the music of jazz instrumentalists:

Somewhere else in a dance hall a jazz combo is creating music; music taken from American Negro jazz and hammered out on the anvil of the South African experience: slum living, thuggery, police raids, job-hunting, shifting ghettos, and so on. The penny whistle takes the key melody, with bass and drums keeping the rhythm. On and off the sax weaves its way through the penny-whistle notes. The musicians grope their way through the notes, expressing by this improvisation the uncertainty and restlessness of urban life which rejects the Negro: its expectations, its violence. They play in order to escape from the pain of rejection and assert their human dignity.

(Voices in the Whirlwind 155)

Coplan summarises the influence of African-American performance culture as follows:

Black American music and dance, and the very ambience of communities like New York’s Harlem, communicated through travelling performers and educators, print media, recordings, and films, have constituted a challenge, a model and a resource for black South

¹² Other influences were also important: the uniformed brass bands that were popular in the townships derived from the fife and drum bands of Scottish immigrants, and it was the *Amalaita* bands in the 1920s and 1930s who introduced the penny whistle into the townships (Coplan 62).

¹³ Nkosi describes shebeens as “the focal point of city life . . . that twilight, underground world . . . where all classes met” (*Home and Exile* 10).

Africans for more than a century. (236)

Titlestad's more recent study, *Making the Changes: Jazz in South African Literature and Reportage* (2004), is a provocative and insightful study of the ways in which jazz and its associated subcultures have been used to mediate, manage and contest the advent of modernity for black South Africans (xi). His second chapter is an in-depth study of "the literary and musical renaissance associated with Sophiatown" (xix), and underlines the continuing significance of Sophiatown in the South African imaginary.¹⁴ As a site of cultural convergence and hybridisation, Sophiatown contradicted everything that *apartheid* with its ideology of separation stood for, and its destruction amounted to much more than just the destruction of an inconveniently situated black urban community.

"BLAME ME ON HOLLYWOOD"¹⁵

Nixon acknowledges the impact of Hollywood and the silver screen on South African township culture in *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood* (1994). The prestige and glamour associated with America and things American were in large measure a result of the exposure of township audiences to American films. Sophiatown boasted two cinemas – the more upmarket Odin and the more rough-and-ready Picture Palace, often referred to as Balanski's (after the owner). The impact of film is enormous: it allows for escape; it allows one to dream, or to live vicariously. Hollywood offered, in Nixon's words, "a reprieve from apartheid's suffocating prohibitions" (31). Gready points to the role of the cinema in "moulding perceptions and values in a culture so in need of, and pliable to, identities" (155). Modisane claims that he was "literally raised inside the cinema. Every characterisation I saw on the screen seemed to leave its mark on me; the performances of Spencer Tracy, in particular, filled me with a special kind of nobility" (169).¹⁶ He vividly captures the reactions of a group of children as they emerge from the cinema:

They were the hero of the film, *The Fastest Gun Alive*, each in his turn was Broderick Crawford, and in their mouths the name, Broderick, was

¹⁴ Titlestad's study draws in part on the work of theorists such as Gilroy and Glissant; its transnational and intercultural perspective is a valuable supplement to the present study, with its South African focus and frame of reference.

¹⁵ This is the title of an MA thesis by Cassandra Ellis (Columbia University, 1990), referred to by Nixon (262).

¹⁶ Cinema was, as he points out, virtually "the only cultural recreation for Africans" (133).

blown into gigantic proportions; they invested the name with the image of the classical hero.

“O Broad-derick is de manne,” one of them said, imitating the bubbling speech of the actor. “Did you hear him when he said: ‘I’m the fastest gun there is?’ Did you?”
(*Blame* 51)

Films directly influenced the behaviour and styles and codes of conduct of a generation of gangsters in the townships – hence the name of Sophiatown’s most powerful gang, “the Americans”.¹⁷ Anthony Sampson, editor of *Drum* from 1952 to 1955, was told by Can Themba that he would never understand his readers until he had seen *Street with no Name*, starring Richard Widmark as the gangster Stiles. Sampson describes the experience as follows:

The cinema was packed with *tsotsis*, shouting and cat-calling. I was the only white man. . . . The lights dimmed and the film began, with . . . a personal message from J. Edgar Hoover, F.B.I. chief, to say that crime does not pay. . . . The scene shifted to the gangsters’ hide out. A hush from the audience. Richard Widmark appeared in one corner. A shriek from the whole house. “Stiles ! Attaboy! Go it, Stiles!” A tense silence.

Stiles wore a long overcoat, sniffed a Benzedrine inhaler, and occasionally bit an apple. Beside him slouched his henchman, wearing a belted raincoat with slits at the back.

“When this film first came out,” Can whispered, “the sales of Benzedrine rocketed. Everybody munched apples. All the *tsotsis* wore those raincoats.”

(*Drum* 101-102)¹⁸

The outlaw figure looms large in the pages of *Drum* and in the imagination of its writers. The gangster or *tsotsi* was a rebel whose rejection of authority and refusal to conform must have seemed attractive. In Modisane’s words, “The white man fears the *tsotsis* who are perhaps the only Africans who have personal dignity; they answer white arrogance with black arrogance, they take their just deserts from a discriminating economy by robbery and pillage” (227). Nixon explains the appeal of the outlaw figure as follows:

¹⁷ Mattera’s gang, “the Vultures”, was named after the film, “Where no Vultures Fly”.

¹⁸ Themba informed Sampson that he had “seen *tsotsis* in Sophiatown planning petty robberies as if they were Stiles and his gang: they drew a map, which nobody understands, and the ‘brains of the outfit’ tells them where to go” (*Drum* 103). From Bailey’s description, it appears that “Kort Boy” (the leader of the Americans) may have been identified with a particular knife-throwing gang member in this film (hence his name). In an interview with Mike Nicol, “Kort Boy” claimed that it was the cinema that taught him how to use a knife: “I saw it in the bioscope then I use it also. MGM films. That time it was black and white. Humphrey Bogart, James Cagney, *Angels with Dirty Faces*. At the Odin” (Nicol 70).

Many black South Africans answered their imposed illegality by embracing an outlaw image. For most *Drum* writers, the contest between daring outlaws and the “banditry of the law” became a symbolic fixation. They wrote tirelessly about illicit speakeasies, forbidden multiracial sex, knife-happy *tsotsis*, passing, and black forays into whites-only churches. Adopting a debonair lawlessness as both a way of life and a writing style, they turned to their beloved Hollywood for ways of dressing up their defiance in criminal chic and of announcing, in the process, their irrevocable urbanness. (31)

The *tsotsi* or gangster functioned, he suggests, as a “bridging figure” between the criminal underworld of Hollywood fantasy and Sophiatown street-life (32). In fact, as a reading of Mattered’s or Modisane’s autobiographies reveals, street life in the ghetto was anything but glamorous. *Drum*’s most famous reporter, Henry Nxumalo, met his death one night at the hands of a killer with a knife. Modisane understood the fear that was the “cornerstone of the gangster rule of Sophiatown” (*Blame* 62), and describes an assault that could well have ended his life (*Blame* 66).

Themba claimed that “the *tsotsis* saw [the *Drum* reporters] as cousins” – and there may be some truth to the claim (*Will to Die* 110). Both the journalists and *tsotsis* shared an irreverence for authority and claimed a freedom of movement and thought that was proscribed by apartheid. Both rejected the roles assigned them in a racially segregated society; both prided themselves on being streetwise and sophisticated; and both chose to live their lives with an often reckless disregard for safety or prudence.¹⁹ According to Mainane, “we were nearer to [the *tsotsis*] than the average black professional person. We drank with them, we spoke their language and we shared their girlfriends” (*Sophiatown Speaks* 50). Nkosi suggests that Themba was himself “the supreme intellectual *tsotsi* of them all, always, in the words of the blues singer, ‘raising hell in the neighbourhood’.” But, he adds, “the neighbourhood in which he raised hell was that sombre, fearful community of the intellect so hideously terrorised by the political regime in South Africa” (“Obituary” x).

¹⁹ Sampson quotes the motto of one Sophiatown *tsotsi*, lifted from the book by Willard Motley, *Knock on any Door*: “Live fast, die young, and have a good-looking corpse” (100). Nicol uses this as the title for his book on the *Drum* and its writers, and suggests that they lived by this precept themselves. Nkosi describes how the same “thugs” who were to be seen chewing on apples in the streets of Johannesburg (in the manner of Stiles in *Street with no Name*) also would torment “middle-class Africans” by forcing them to stand recite passages from Shakespeare – “for which they would be showered with sincere applause” (*Home and Exile* 13).

Not surprisingly, these attitudes spill over into and influence both the style and substance of the stories published in *Drum*. Reflecting on his own short stories, Modisane writes dismissively of the “escapist trash” that he produced at the time, but argues that even in these stories his escapist hero was “seldom, if ever, on the side of law and order”:

Like me, my characters were invested with a contempt for the law, their efforts were directed towards a flaunting of the law; my heroes were social maladjusts in a society where heroism is measured by acts of defiance against law and order.

(Blame 139)

In this respect, even when they seem to be ephemeral or escapist, the *Drum* stories reflect the tenor of their times and capture the attitudes and styles that constituted an affirmation of new urban identities. Van Dyk argues that one should avoid judging these stories simply in terms of their content: “The new idiom [the *Drum* style] would, in the context of the fifties, have contained a provocative ideological quality, in its mockery of civilised English, and in its refusal to conform to accepted ‘standards’” (40). We can concur with Nixon that, “*Drum* gave symbolic sustenance to urban identities that could not be reduced to the negative plight of ‘detrabalisation’” (30).

“LITTLE HARLEM”

Nowhere in Africa does one find such a strong fellow-feeling towards the American Black as there exists among the Africans of South Africa. How else could it be? The African in South Africa, and the Afro-American have both suffered from and endured white arrogance, and their history is written in blood: it is a history of pillage and plunder; fire and murder; dispossession and humiliation.

(Mphahlele, African Image 96)

Many of the writers of the 50s would have had some exposure to the work of the Harlem Renaissance, and may have sensed some kind of correspondence between Harlem (and Chicago) in the 1920s and the world of township jazz, shebeens and gangsters.²⁰ In his pioneering article, “Sophiatown: the Renaissance that Failed” (1976), Visser implicitly postulates Harlem and its “renaissance” as a precedent and analogue for the *Drum* writers, and in his more recent study Nixon explores the “loose

²⁰ In fact, Sophiatown was occasionally referred to as “little Harlem” (Nixon 13).

affinities” between Sophiatown and Harlem (13). He suggests that what the *Drum* writers craved was “an affirming precedent” (16):

In Harlem literature some of them recognised a world that was black and urban, spoke of the trauma and promise of displacement, and defeated all “tribal” categories. At the time when the very idea of belonging to the city was coming under increasing legislative pressure, the Harlem Renaissance helped emergent South African writers to fortify their claim. In short, their affiliation with a bold city strain of African-American writing became, to adapt an apartheid term, a tonic form of “unlawful association”. (16)

As Nixon shows, there is some evidence of contact and linkage between the *Drum* writers and the Harlem Renaissance writers. Langston Hughes, in particular, was quite closely associated with *Drum*: he was one of the judges of *Drum*’s annual short story competition in 1954, and in the same year sent copies of two of his books to Mphahlele (Nixon 16). Mphahlele mentions Richard Wright, Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes as writers who influenced his own early work (*African Image* 214). Rive describes the way in which “a new world opened up” when he discovered Langston Hughes’ *The Ways of White Folks* on the shelves of the Muir Street library in District Six. Hughes, like Richard Wright, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer and Cedric Dover, were “not only speaking to [him] but were speaking about [him]” (“On Being a Black Writer in South Africa” 21).

If one looks at the writing of the *Drum* journalists, one can trace particular examples of indebtedness, such as the influence of the Langston Hughes (*Simple Speaks his Mind*) on Casey Motsisi’s “On the Beat” columns.²¹ If one takes American popular fiction into account, the stories of Arthur Maimane (written under the pseudonym of Arthur Mogale) are obviously indebted to writers such as Raymond Chandler and Peter Cheyney. Lindfors points out that the private detective in Maimane’s stories is patterned so closely on an American stereotype that “nothing about him or his adventures can be identified as authentically South African” (“Post-War Literature in English” 56). Not surprisingly, the more derivative the story, the less interesting it becomes.

One needs to recognise, beyond specific instances of indebtedness, the more general influence – in terms of idiom and style - of the American jazz and blues tradition. Jacobs argues that the influence of the blues, in particular, can be seen in

²¹ Chapman makes this point in his essay in *The Drum Decade* (217), and it is repeated by Nixon (16).

Modisane's *Blame me on History*, and points to the way Modisane employs a musical metaphor in which to "cast his experience": "My life is like the penny whistle music spinning on eternally with the same repetitive persistency . . ." (Jacobs 9; Modisane 118). It is no coincidence that the *Drum* style should have been dubbed "matshikeze" after the writing of *Drum*'s music critic, the jazz musician and composer Todd Matshikiza (Sampson, *Drum* 28).

Beyond particular instances of indebtedness or influence, the Harlem Renaissance analogy rests partly on the fact that there existed in Sophiatown in the 1950s a small group of writers and artists who knew each other, shared a similar lifestyle and outlook, were conscious of themselves as modern and cosmopolitan, and shared a similar intellectual curiosity. Writing from the vantage point of the 1980s, Mphahlele says of the *Drum* writers:

Although we were not a school in the fifties, although we had diverse interests and intellectual pursuits, even as journalists, we shared this much in common: we had found a voice. And because urban blacks in South Africa have so much in common with urban Afro-Americans, almost to a man [sic] the writers of the fifties had more than just a dip into American culture: journalism, imaginative literature, jazz, innovative prose styles.

("My experience as a writer" 78-79)

Nat Nakasa, who worked on *Drum* as a reporter and assistant editor, describes Sophiatown as having had "a heart like Greenwich Village or Harlem":

During the last days of Sophiatown, nearly ten years ago, you were more likely to walk into a conversation centred around James Joyce or John Osborne or Langston Hughes instead of local names like Gertrude Millin or Olive Schreiner. . . . Sophiatown is the only place I know where African writers and aspirant writers lived in close proximity, almost as a community.

(*World of Nat Nakasa* 188).

When he actually visited Harlem in 1965, Nakasa expected to be welcomed like "a long-missed cousin" (173). In fact, he discovered that Harlem had no shebeens, and his report reveals the distance (and often discomfort) he felt as he tried to relate to Harlem and its people.²²

²² His article, "Mr Nakasa Goes to Harlem", was published in the *New York Times* in 1965, and republished in *The World of Nat Nakasa* (173-183).

DRUM

Drum, as Lewis Nkosi describes it, was “not so much a magazine as it was a symbol of the new African cut adrift from the tribal reserve – urbanised, eager, fast-talking and brash” (*Home and Exile* 8). He goes on to describe those qualities that were expected of “a *Drum* man” – qualities, which, he says, went beyond one’s professional obligations to the paper:

Even in one’s personal life one was supposed to exhibit a unique intellectual style; usually urbane, ironic, morally tough and detached. . . . Above all, in *Drum* it was generally assumed that one couldn’t deal professionally with urban African life unless one had descended to its very depths as well as climbed to its heights. A *Drum* man took sex and alcohol in his stride, or was supposed to, and stayed in the front line of danger so long as there was danger to be endured.

(*Home and Exile* 9)

Initially, however, *Drum* was very different. It is instructive to look at how and why it transformed itself in under a year, from its uncertain beginning in March 1951. When Anthony Sampson arrived (at the invitation of Jim Bailey, who provided the financial backing) to join *Drum* a few months after its inception, he found the magazine in crisis. Its circulation had dropped from an initial 24,000 to 16,000 (below that of its rival *Zonk*), and its staff consisted of the editor, Bob Crisp (a former Springbok cricketer and World War II tank commander) and an Italian typist.²³ Sampson describes the magazine he took over as “a sixpenny monthly magazine, printed on cheap yellow newsprint; the bright cover showed two Africans facing each other, symbolically, across the continent: one in a Western hat and suit, the other with African skins and assegai” (*Drum* 15). The reason for its falling circulation was becoming obvious: “Our readers did not yearn for a diet of improving stories, written by so-called white experts” (Bailey, “Letting the Genie Out” 124).

The first number of *Drum* (originally called *The African Drum*) is characterised by a well-meaning earnestness. The contents page carried the following notice: “It is the intention of the Directors to ensure as soon as possible the assistance of an African Advisory Board, composed of eminent African men of letters and

²³ The magazine was Crisp’s brainchild; he approached a Cape Town advocate, Robert Stratford, for financial backing, and Stratford in turn approached Bailey. Bailey’s initial contribution was £1000; when Stratford left for the UK a few months later, Bailey took over full financial responsibility for funding *Drum*. (Bailey, “Letting the Genie Out” 124)

leaders of thought. Their role will be to keep ‘The African Drum’ in close touch with Africa and Africans” (*Drum* March, 1951). From the outset, it was determined to avoid any political affiliation:

You will look in vain within the covers of this magazine for any attempt to mould your thoughts politically or for any expression or denial of a political creed. What we do believe in is the inevitable progress of the African and that the role of his white neighbour is to encourage that progress and help increase its tempo. If this magazine has a message it is the gentle one of: *Progress through knowledge and culture*; and the universal Christian one of: *Love thy neighbour as thyself*. (3)

This sounds rather like a latter-day version of Arnold’s “sweetness and light”. Implicit in this is an ideology of benevolent white trusteeship, a belief in gradual progress, and an affirmation of the moderate aspirations of the “New African”. This liberal and Christian ethos was exemplified by the choice of Alan Paton’s *Cry, The Beloved Country* as the first novel for serial publication. Readers were assured that they would understand the novel because “it is told by a man who understands you”; it is “the most sympathetic book written on the tremendous problem of race relations” (9). The first number of *Drum* also introduced the first of a series of articles by musicologist Hugh Tracey entitled, “Music of the Tribes”. J.D. Reinhalt Jones (former director of the Institute of Race Relations and Senator representing Africans in the Transvaal and Free State) contributed the first article in the “Masterpiece in Bronze” series, entitled “Aggrey of Africa” (11). Professor A.J.H. Godwin of UCT contributed “The Migration into Africa” (18, 52) – the first of a series entitled “Know Yourself”. There is an article by Miss E.M. Shaw of the South African Museum on “African Art: Inspiration and Development” (42-43), an article on African folk lore (“Africa is rich in fable”), an eye-witness account of an Ovambo marriage ceremony (50-51), and there is the first of four articles on “What to Preach” (46-47). There are also articles on “Land Betterment in Central Africa” (25, 52) as well as an account of an African Chieftainess who had the wisdom to cull cattle because of drought. A common thread is an emphasis on traditional African beliefs, customs and traditions, and an endorsement of (often white-sponsored) attempts to bring progress and enlightenment to Africa. It is, in fact, a relatively easy step from this to the ideology of separate

development.²⁴ Notably absent are articles dealing with contemporary black urban life – the only exception being a page entitled “Music for Moderns”, featuring a story about “Penny Whistle Cele” (spotted in a bus queue in Alexandra).

Drum's initial character can be ascribed in part to the failure (on the part of its first editor and Board of Directors²⁵) to appreciate the extent and impact of black urbanisation in post-war South Africa.²⁶ For Sampson, fresh from Oxford, this impact was obvious: “What struck me most in the early 1950s was the irreconcilable contrast between the vigour with which black people at all levels were adapting themselves to city life, and the determination of the apartheid government to prevent them from becoming part of it” (“Black Johannesburg” 10). Sampson reports that while these first few numbers of *Drum* were “much praised by white liberals and educators”, its circulation was falling, and he attributed this to its failure to appeal to its primary audience, urban Africans (“Early *Drum*” 15). When the *Drum* office moved to Johannesburg in July, Sampson was introduced to Henry Nxumalo, their newly appointed sports editor – “the first African I had met” (*Drum* 17). Nxumalo took him around to African homes and clubs to find out why Africans weren't buying *Drum*, and the answer seems to have come loud and clear:

“Ag, why do you dish out that stuff, man?” said a man with golliwog hair in a floppy American suit, at the Bantu Men's Social Centre.
 “Tribal music! Tribal history! Chiefs! We don't care about chiefs!
 Give us jazz and film stars, man! We want Duke Ellington, Satchmo and hot dames! Yes, brother, anything American. You can cut out this junk about kraals and folk-tales and Basutos in blankets – forget it!
 You're just trying to keep us backward, that's what! Tell us what happening right here, on the Reef!” (*Drum* 20)²⁷

According to Job Rathebe, a member of *Drum*'s Advisory Board, the problem with *Drum* was that it had “the white hand on it. . . . *Drum*'s what white men want Africans

²⁴ Sampson comments that “the theory of ‘Bantu Education’ has support from many Europeans including Liberals; it took to extremes the ‘cultural apartheid’ which had been inherent in the early numbers of *Drum*” (*Drum* 171).

²⁵ The original Board of Directors was chaired by Robin Stratford (Q.C.) and included James A. Bailey and Robert J. Crisp as Directors.

²⁶ Rabkin points out that *Drum* was born out of and conditioned by a historical process – “the migration to the cities” – and that the early assumptions of its proprietor and white editorial staff “showed the experience to be as yet ill-digested, hardly even recognised” (“*Drum Magazine*” 4).

²⁷ *Drum* conducted a survey of their readers' opinions and published the results in the September 1951 number. The list was topped by *Cry, the Beloved Country*, followed by “Masterpiece in Bronze”; “Tribal Music” came stone last at number 26 on the list; “Folklore” came in at number 22, and “Farming” at number 24.

to be, not what they are” (*Drum* 20-21). It would be hard to find a clearer expression of urbanity and modernity, or of the influence of American popular culture on the urban culture of black South Africa. *Drum* survived because Sampson and Bailey were able to absorb this information, and the style and orientation of *Drum* shifted dramatically over the next few months.²⁸ The September edition appeared for the first time with a cover photograph – of an exuberant and attractive young black woman, clad in whites, leaping over a tennis net, racquet in hand.²⁹ The next month, October, has the first of many features on urban crime, with a cover picture of a menacing, scarfed, smartly-suited figure in a Woodrow hat poised against the backdrop of Johannesburg’s skyline at night. The caption reads, “Shadow over Johannesburg”. The accompanying article is entitled “Inside Johannesburg’s Underworld”, with the subheading, “The New Chicago”, establishing an American precedent. The large photograph alongside shows four gangsters crouching in a street, with the caption: “Murder Street, Sophiatown. Victoria Road: Where no decent African dares to walk alone at night” (October 1951 5). *Drum* had found its subject matter and its audience. Its formula for increasing sales was, in Sampson’s words, “cheesecake and crime” (*Drum* 30).

Drum also found its style – a style in keeping with the racy idiom and rhythm of township speech. This was a definite break from the more measured “educated” English previously used by black journalists, and created an instant rapport with its audience. According to Sampson:

The sedate syntax of the European papers was all wrong for our readers, who thought and spoke in jazz and exclamation marks. There was rhythm throbbing in everything they said and did. . . . We wanted *Drum* to have an African style, and to capture some of the vigour of African speech; but it was not easy, for African intellectuals and writers, cut off from their own people, used long words and paraded dry facts, to show off their learning.

(*Drum* 27)

²⁸ As a result of these changes, Crisp resigned and Sampson took over as editor from December.

²⁹ She meets all the requirement of the *Drum* cover girl: “The cover girl must be happy and good-looking – preferably aged 15 to 18 so that she appeals to young readers. Every second or third cover girls should be Coloured, preferably Africanish. The cover must be bright and striking and this depends on the use of a model who is not static – movement is an important part of the cover’s appeal. The girl must be doing something cheerfully” (quoted by Manoim 127). I am indebted to Choonoo (258) for the quotation, which reveals just how calculated *Drum*’s appeal to its readers was.

The person who transformed *Drum* writing was Todd Matshikiza, who joined *Drum* as music editor in December 1951: “He wrote as he spoke, in a brisk tempo with rhythm in every sentence. He attacked the typewriter like a piano” (Sampson 28). The *Drum* journalists transferred this prose style into their fiction: they were bursting out of a straightjacket of formality and respectability.

One particular picture, taken by Jurgen Schadeberg, captures the remarkable concentration of energy and talent in the *Drum* newsroom. It shows the *Drum* staff in March 1955. On the left (foreground) is Henry Nxumalo, pipe in mouth, typing; behind him is Es’kia Mphahlele, glasses pushed up on his forehead, stretching; behind him are Casey Motsisi and Can Themba, fooling around for a photo which is being taken by Jerry Ntsipe (perched on a desk); further to the right is Arthur Maimane, cigarette in mouth, studying a pin-up photo of a scantily clad white woman (together with Victor Xashimba and Dan Chocho); poring over a map on the floor are Benson Kyantyi and Ken Mtetwa, with Bob Gosani, far right, camera in hand, preparing to take a shot.³⁰ Samson gives a vivid sense of what the *Drum* office was like:

The office had no visible order, no hierarchy, no division; and it looked all the more chaotic because the *reporters* did not need to go outside the door to find the news; the news came to them. Gangsters would come into that big shabby room to offer their life stories. Pin-up girls came to be photographed against an improvised back-drop. Politicians came to explain their new campaigns. One day I was told that there were seven witch-doctors waiting to see me, and there they were, in their full regalia of beads, complaining that they had been libelled in the last month’s issue.

(“Black Johannesburg” 10)

It was the energy and commitment of this diverse and talented group of writers who made *Drum* what it was. They brought with them was a zest for English and for the intellectual and cultural worlds that this opened up. Gordimer testifies to the diversity and depth of their reading and to the liveliness of their English: “The Fifties intellectuals and artists read anything and everything. They were city people, educated before Bantu education” (*Sophiatown Speaks* 29).³¹ Some of this excitement can be sensed in Lewis Nkosi’s account of his arrival in Johannesburg:

³⁰ The picture is illustration No. 4 in Nicol’s *A Good-Looking Corpse*.

³¹ Interestingly, Nkosi’s own comments seem to flatly contradict these claims: he argues that black South Africans write “as though Dostoevsky, Kafka or Joyce has never lived”: what we have, he says, is “a group of writers operating blindly in a vacuum” (*Home and Exile* 130). Oddly, Nkosi writes as

It seemed to me in those years incredible that there could be people in the world who didn't love words as much as I did, or people who did not find the appearance of a new book a magical and awesomely exciting phenomenon. I walked about the streets of the bustling noisy city with new English words clicking like coins in the pockets of my mind; I tried them out on each passing scene, relishing their power to describe and apprehend experience

(*Home and Exile* 7)

What one has here is not so much the response of a journeyman reporter but the openness to experience and the sensitivity of language of the incipient artist. "I was in the newspaper business for many things," says Nkosi, "but the most important of these was to learn to use the language" (*Home and Exile* 139). What Paris was to the young American writers of the 20s, Johannesburg was to the young Lewis Nkosi – "warm and exciting, vibrant with an undiscovered life" (*Home and Exile* 12). One man who understood this well was Tom Hopkinson, who took over as editor of *Drum* at the beginning of 1958. The first reason for *Drum's* success was, he says, the quality of its writers:

I say writers rather than journalists because it was the imaginative writing of men such as Can Themba, Todd Matshikiza, Nat Nakasa, Casey Motsisi, Ezekiel Mphahlele and others which drew in the readers and was talked about in shebeens and speakeasies Pithy, terse and nervous writing which came straight out of the conditions of location life.

("The Knight's Tale" 21).

It is not surprising, then, that there should have been, at best, a blurred line between the journalism and the fiction of these writers. The *Drum* writers used techniques or devices associated with fiction to enliven and dramatise their reporting – and many of them drew on these same techniques to give a fictionalised texture to their autobiographies. In this respect they have been compared to the American "new journalists" of the 1960s (Visser 49; Choonoo 260-61; Van Dyk 145-147): the aim is

though he himself were not one of this group of writers. Nkosi's comments may have an element of truth, but there is so much evidence to the contrary, both in the testimony of others, and in the writing itself, that they need to be taken with a pinch of salt. Mphahlele and Themba were both widely read (and both were university graduates) while Modisane's voracious reading is reflected in *Blame me on History*. As Nixon remarks, "it is a historical and class oddity of Modisane's writing that his renditions of Johannesburg ghetto life are flavoured with comparative allusions to Victor Hugo, Dickens, *The Inferno*, *Paradise Lost*, *Dr. Faustus*, Plato, and *The Bible* (23).

as much to entertain (or enliven or provoke) as it is to convey information. Chapman argues that the exposure of the *Drum* journalists to the socio-political realities of black urban life carried over into their fiction and ensured a degree of social relevance for what might otherwise seem lightweight stories: “Most of the writers were concerned with more than telling a story. They were concerned with what was happening to their people and, in consequence, with moral and social questions. It is this which distinguishes them from being purveyors of pulp fiction” (“More Than Telling a Story” 183).

Some of the *Drum* writers certainly come close to being “purveyors of pulp fiction” (Themba, Maimane, Modisane³²); others, like Mphahlele, shared Nkosi’s impatience with “the ready-made plots of racial violence, social apartheid, interracial love affairs . . .” (*Home and Exile* 132). In flat contradiction to the familiar, received wisdom about *Drum* and the writing of the 1950s (that it is a species of “protest writing”), Ndebele asserts that the “vast majority” of *Drum* stories show “an almost total lack of interest in the directly political issues of the time” (*Rediscovery* 39):

The writers of these stories seemed keen only to tell fantastic stories so that readers could enjoy themselves as much as possible. They were pushed forward in their writings in order to indulge the lively imagination of the urban population. . . . But going hand in hand with these stories was a very lively journalism. . . . *There seemed no confusion at this time between the language of exposition on the one hand and the language of creative writing on the other. . . .* What was common, though, was the penchant for spectacular representation or reporting.

(*Rediscovery* 39-40; my italics)

This is not the place to discuss Ndebele’s argument, but one should note that his position is predicated upon an awareness of the tension between the demands of fictional storytelling, on the one hand, and the demands of social commitment or “relevance” on the other (*Rediscovery* 22). Critical debate in this country (at least in the 1970s and 1980s) was often polarised around this issue, and the critic’s position was often determined by which of these two poles (“autonomy” or “relevance”) was emphasised.

³² At one point in his autobiography Modisane confesses to writing “innocuous short stories, escapist trash” (*Blame* 139). He directly contradicts the idea that his stories were a form of protest: “My writing showed a studious omission of commitment, the histrionics of tight-fisted protest” (*Blame* 88).

Chapter 4

THE *DRUM* STORIES

The previous chapter has provided the context for the readings of the work of particular *Drum* writers in this chapter. The writers have been selected because of the prominence that their work was given by *Drum* (and often by subsequent critics) and because by comparing and contrasting their work one is able to fill out, question or qualify the often over-simple or stereotypical picture of the *Drum* writer – as someone given over to the vulgar sensationalism, for example.

DYKE SENTSO

The short story writer who was most assiduously promoted by the early *Drum* was Dyke Sentso. Between June 1951 and April 1954 *Drum* published five of his stories, more than any other writer in these early years (if one excludes the twelve crime stories by “Arthur Mogale” serialised monthly in 1953). His first story, “The Harvest is Waiting” (*Drum* June 1951) was accompanied by the following editorial comment: “Have no doubt about it, we have discovered in Dyke Sentso an outstanding writer whose prose can be measured up to that of any contemporary of any race.”¹ His third story, “Pay Back” (May 1952) includes an insert, under the heading “Drum Authors No. 1. Dyke Sentso”, with the following information:

Dyke Herriott Sentso was born thirty years ago in Kroonstad and educated at Tigerkloof Training Institution. His life has been devoted to teaching and writing and he is now working as a teacher at Vredefort. He is well-known as the author of “Matlakala”, a Sesuto (sic) book, published by the Morija Publishing Co., and has written many articles and short stories. Dyke Sentso says that he writes “simply because I love it and I owe everything to the influence of my father who was a minister of religion”. (25)

Sentso’s fifth short story, “Under the Blue-gum Trees”, was published by *Drum* in April 1954, and won the annual short story contest for that year. The story was preceded by a two-page feature article entitled, “At Home With £50 Winner”, with the subheading, “*Drum* takes the good news to Dyke Sentso!” The report describes him as

¹ This is cited by Chapman, “*Drum* and its Significance”, 200.

“a very gay, kind, simple lively young man of thirty”; he and his wife seem overjoyed at receiving the news of the award (28). The *Drum* reporters encouraged him to take his writing career seriously: “You could become a Langston Hughes, a Herbert Dhlomo, a Peter Abrahams, an Oliver Walker!” (28).

Clearly, with his strong religious background, his rural location (“a tiny Free State dorp” (28)), and his record as an African-language writer, Sentso does not fit the standard profile of the *Drum* writer. His stories often have a rural setting, focus on the plight of the African farm worker, and are written in a rather formal, standard English. Occasionally, as in the first paragraph of “The Harvest is Waiting”, we have echoes of sub-Romantic poetic diction: after a description of the mealie cobs bulging “thick and pregnant under their concealing sheaths”, we are told: “The sparrow, overfed, chirruped and trilled in contented glee” (4). All is not well in this rural paradise, however. The farm worker’s wife, Neo, lives in a mud hut not far from the main house – close enough for her to realise the contrast between her poverty and their wealth. She is also pregnant and “weary”. While her husband and older son are away helping the farmer deliver his produce to the market, she begins a difficult labour and her child is apparently born dead. The story lacks a coherent focus, and is rather awkward in its attempts to extract pathos from the situation, but it does raise issues which are dealt with more successfully in “Under the Blue-gum Trees”: the attitude of the white “baas” (“He seems a good Baas” (5)); the relationship between the “baas” and his loyal worker (“You are a good native” (5)); and the personal history which creates links of obligation between the two (April had saved “baas Scholtz” from drowning when both were boys). A sub-theme – the attraction of the city – is introduced but left unresolved. The most interesting paragraph explores the limited consciousness of the farm worker, April, as he contrasts his young son’s “quiet innocence” and “fearless determination” with his own reduced condition:

April felt that some time he had looked the same but that some great force had reduced him to what he was. He could not explain the force but he knew only that he had worked and worked, swept streams of sweat from his brow for very nearly fifty years but that he had never lived above want and care. (49)

This is followed by the sentence, “Well, he was not complaining. The Bible said that it was right to sweat for one’s existence” (5). Stoicism and piety are implicitly endorsed.

The second story, “The Sun Stood Still” (November 1951) is quite moving in its simplicity. It focuses on a single situation – drought – and explores the reactions of the saintly Selai and the other members of this poor rural village. Its central theme is suffering: “Please God, they must not suffer!” exclaims the old man, as he watches the supply of mealies run out and the animals die. Even when he has only two bags left, the self-sacrificing Selai continues to supply mealies from his granary. Chapman likens the story to a parable, where the drought “either undermines or fortifies human resilience or integrity” (“*Drum* and its Significance” 200). It is also reminiscent of one of Pauline Smith’s spare and unflinching tales of fortitude and suffering, set among the *bywoners* of the little Karoo.

In his next two stories Sentso shifts the scene to Johannesburg, but there is an obvious loss of authenticity and interest. “Pay Back” (May 1952) is a rather predictable morality tale whose lesson is the time-honoured one of the need to choose friends carefully (compare R.R.R. Dhlomo). The situation is summed up in the story’s caption: “What happens to Hendrik when he falls in with bad friends? Can he convince the Magistrate of his innocence or must he pay for another man’s crime?” (24). “Other People’s Goods” (February 1954) follows the familiar pattern of the crime story, with the obvious moral that “crime does not pay”. The urban setting hardly features, and character and motivation are largely unexplored.² The second story, perhaps influenced by the “Arthur Mogale” series which ran through 1953, employs Americanised diction in the exchanges between the gang members.

In his final, prize-winning story, “Under the Blue-gums” (June 1954), Sentso returns to the world he is more familiar with, and we revisit the themes introduced in “The Harvest is Waiting”. Here, however, Sentso is much more assured in his handling of his material, and produces a complex but coherent narrative which explores a particular situation in some depth. This situation is the predicament of African farm workers who face retrenchment as farms are increasingly mechanised. Beyond this, the story explores the fear and isolation in which the white farming

² “Other People’s Goods” does at least dramatise the responses of Zondo as he flees from the arresting policemen, and in so doing may, as Van Dyk, claims, give crime a “human face” (54). It is, however,

community lives, although the description in the opening two paragraphs is so generalised that the particular referent is at first unclear. In particular, the story foregrounds the relationship between the farmer, Japie Genade, and his loyal “farm captain”, Moiloa. The paternalistic master-worker relationship is complicated by two factors. Firstly, there are Genade’s ambivalent feelings as he “mingles” with his farm workers: he enjoys their company (and their deference) and at one point has to resist the impulse to dance: “The words of his wife suddenly came to him. You could dance too, she had said, but remember, you are white! Suddenly he left the crowd and stood apart by himself” (49).³ His whiteness guarantees his authority and superiority (as “baas”), but at the same time it sets him apart. The dilemma encapsulated here has, of course, been the subject of sustained exploration, in one way or another, by many white South African writers.

The second complicating factor is the tie of obligation and loyalty that links Genade and Moiloa. This is intensified by the tragic incident which lies at the heart of the story: Moiloa’s young son and Genade’s young son play together on the farm as friends and equals (another recurring South African situation). When they tire of shooting at birds with catapults, Gert runs to fetch the gun which his mother keeps hidden in the kitchen, and accidentally shoots and kills Moiloa’s son. Moiloa bears no grudge for what he accepts was a tragic accident (even though he has now lost his one remaining son). At the funeral the only man to shed tears is Genade. Shortly afterwards, however, Genade buys two tractors, and Moiloa is retrenched. The story traces his search for work on other farms in the area, and his unsuccessful attempt to acquire a stand in the location. The denouement comes when Genade, who has sold his farm and bought a house in town, mistakes a passing black man for Moiloa. Impelled by his unacknowledged guilt (at the fatal shooting, and at his treatment of Moiloa), Genade finds Moiloa, and promises to get him a stand in town where he and his family can live. Genade has just been elected a town councillor, and when Moiloa warns him of the difficulty he might face, he “raises himself to his full height . . . the height of a rich town councillor”, and declares: “ ‘With me . . . many things are possible. You know that, don’t you?’” (59). The final sentences read as follows:

difficult to agree with his assessment of Sentso’s two urban stories as “seminal pieces” – and his claim that “Pay Back” introduced the “tough tale” is implausible (55).

Moilola knew, and he knew, too, that with white people, many things were possible . . . were made possible . . . But that did not matter at the moment. What mattered was that he would get a stand . . . his life's ambition.

'Thank you very much,' he said . . . and then 'Thank you very much.' (59)

It is remarkable how much is repressed or left unacknowledged in this story – but is nevertheless present in the subtext. Genade's "generosity" or "benevolence" is inseparable from his sense of superiority and control as a white man and as a "baas": he enjoys the deference and respect of his farm workers – but will not allow any human ties or obligations (whether acknowledged or not) to interfere with the pursuit of profit. The story reveals the complex intersection of the forces at work, benevolent paternalism, white *baaskap* and the ruthless logic of capitalism, as a result of which the black farm worker is reduced to the status of a dispensable unit of labour. The inhumanity of the system is exposed in the series of negotiations that lead to Moilola's eventual acceptance of a wage which he knows is inadequate (54-56), and in his unsuccessful application for a stand in the location: "Who is going to work on the farms if all these poor people come to the locations? . . . Besides . . . they are supposed to be labour reserves for the towns" (56). Set against the structural exploitation of farm labour is a more complex pattern of human relationships: Genade cannot be both "baas" and friend, and the deference he enjoys is simply the attempt of those who are powerless to ingratiate themselves.⁴ He weeps real tears at the funeral of his son's friend – yet proceeds to retrench Moilola. While questioning the "benevolence" of Genade the story also implicitly questions the "gratitude" expressed (twice) by Moilola in the final sentence: Moilola in fact has no option but to express gratitude.⁵

This story is a considerable advance on Sentso's earlier stories. Its greater coherence and complexity may owe something to Sentso's conscious or unconscious

³ For ease of reference the page numbers are those of the story as reprinted in Chapman's anthology, *The Drum Decade*.

⁴ Moilola interrupts a conversation between two workers who are discussing "white man". According to one worker, "The white man does not understand humble stammering respect. He mistakes it for stuttering stupidity" (50).

⁵ One should note that Moilola's "gratitude" for his rescue by Genade does not prevent him from first establishing the terms of Genade's offer: "I cannot live in a room at the back . . . I have a family and some animals. Can you get me a stand in the location?" (58). This presents Genade with the opportunity to display both his benevolence and his power, as a white man and newly elected councillor.

reworking of themes which had been explored and dramatised in a memorable way in Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*.⁶ If Sentso had not already read Paton's novel, he would have done so in the pages of *Drum*, where it was serialised from March 1951. He may also have seen (or at least heard of) Zoltan Korda's 1952 film version of *Cry, the Beloved Country*, starring Canada Lee and Sidney Poitier. In both Sentso's story and Paton's novel we have a pair of fathers and a pair of sons. In both cases the one son shoots the other (although in Paton's novel it is the black son, Absalom Kumalo, who shoots his counterpart, Arthur Jarvis.) The effect is to create a complex and painful link between the two fathers, who in both cases come to recognise some kind of mutuality or interdependence. In Paton's case, this takes the form of the acts of benevolence carried out by Arthur Jarvis senior, who (like Genade) is a white farmer. In Sentso's case, this takes the form of Genade's intervention to rescue Moiloa from a life of hard labour and set him up on a stand in the location. Both Moiloa and Kumalo express their gratitude for the "benevolence" of their white counterpart. When Kumalo asks, "'Where would we be without all that this white man has done for us?'" (227-8) he could almost be speaking for Moiloa, or, arguably, for the implied author. Both Jarvis and Genade come to acknowledge some obligation to Kumalo and Moiloa, in spite of their earlier attempts to deny or ignore this. In both cases the relationship between the two fathers depends on the Christian virtues of compassion, charity and forgiveness. It cannot be coincidental that Genade's name means "Mercy" in Afrikaans (whatever irony one may read into this). In Paton's novel Jarvis comes to acknowledge that Kumalo is (in the Christian sense) his "neighbour" and begins to act accordingly. In Sentso's story, by finding Moiloa a stand in the location, Genade in effect makes Moiloa his "neighbour". One may conclude from this that the implicit ideology in both story and novel is that of Christian liberalism: the solution to the problem of race relations is to be found by acknowledging one's shared humanity and through the act of forgiveness. Both texts seem to affirm the transformative power of acts of (apparent) generosity or kindness.

These points of resemblance are more than coincidental. At the heart of both texts is a crime (the murder of one son by the other) which requires forgiveness and expiation on the part of the two fathers. Both Moiloa and Kumalo are sustained by

⁶ Chapman suggests that Sentso's stories, and the "simple, honest responses of his black farm-worker protagonists" probably owe something to the "pervasive influence" of mission schooling and *Cry, The Beloved Country* ("Drum and its Significance" 200) – but he doesn't pursue this.

their Christian faith. Kumalo's journey becomes a pilgrimage in which his faith is tested. At one point, after his worst fears have been fulfilled, he gives way to despair, and has to be counselled and rebuked by his friend and fellow-priest, Msimangu. Similarly, Moiloa at one point gives in to despair, and prays to the Lord to be taken to "[his] land of promise and rest where there is neither want nor care" (56). Implicit in both texts is the idea that our earthly journey entails pain and suffering, but that ultimately we will find peace or fulfilment in the next world. Like Kumalo, Moiloa is counselled and rebuked (in Moiloa's case, by his wife): instead of yielding to despair, he resolves to "work and hope" (57). In both the novel and the story, the underlying Christian metaphor of life as a journey or quest or pilgrimage is made explicit: "Come Bless, the journey is long, the quest uncertain" (54).⁷ Both stories exploit obvious moments of pathos. The description of Moiloa, trembling and hardly able to speak, is reminiscent of Kumalo's behaviour at a climactic moment of the novel (when he encounters and recognises Arthur Jarvis senior). Finally, the generalised climate of fear and suspicion that is evoked in the opening paragraphs of Sentso's story clearly resembles the passages in *Cry, the Beloved Country* which depict or dramatise a general state of fear and suspicion. This fear applies in a very specific way to Kumalo, but in a general way to all South Africans who live in a racially divided society: Msimangu tells Kumalo, "It is fear that rules this land" (25).

In terms of style, theme, subject matter and implied ideology, Sentso's stories are clearly not representative of *Drum* writing.⁸ The rejection by the *Drum* writers of the humility and submissiveness which they saw embodied in the figure of Stephen Kumalo was so strong and pervasive that Paton's novel seems to have operated as a kind of counter-text. This is Nkosi's memorable description of the *Drum* writers' response to Stephen Kumalo:

In Stephen Kumalo we thought we saw, then, another Uncle Tom secretly finding his way into our midst by rural train via Ixopo and Carisbrooke, covered with the dust of the humble and lowly, speaking in the measured cadences of a biblical tongue, which was scarcely recognisable to us.

(Home and Exile 5)

⁷ "Bless" is the name of Moiloa's horse; again, the name seems significant.

⁸ This does not suggest, however, that he is "consciously disengaging from what was expected of the *Drum* writer" (Van Dyk 56).

According to Mphahlele, “Kumalo always remains the same suffering, Christlike, childlike character from beginning to end. He is always trembling with humility. He accepts the scheme of things” (*African Image* 157). For Mphahlele, Kumalo represents “the Africans of the older generation who behave . . . with self-effacement in the presence of white people”, the type whose stock response is to “bear and suffer” (158). He is a “man with a halo” (157) whom Paton manipulates for his own, sentimental purposes: “Because the message keeps imposing itself on us in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, we cannot but feel how thickly laid on the writer’s liberalism is” (159).

The improvised shebeen scene in Lionel Rogosin’s film, *Come Back Africa* (1959) provides compelling evidence for the *Drum* writers’ rejection of Paton’s novel (and of Kumalo in particular). The film was shot in and around Johannesburg and Sophiatown in 1958, with the help of the *Drum* writers. Nkosi and Modisane co-wrote the script (after a brainstorming session with Rogosin one Saturday afternoon (Davis 50)).⁹ The plot, according to Rogosin, was “neither purely factual nor really fictional” (Davis 51); the result is a fictional documentary or docudrama which follows the experience of a migrant worker, Zacharia, as he seeks work in and struggles to adapt to life in Johannesburg.¹⁰ Built into the film, by means of a shebeen scene featuring Nkosi, Modisane and Themba (playing themselves!) is a scathing critique of the kind of well-meaning white liberalism that had produced the figure of Stephen Kumalo.¹¹ The contempt and mockery of Nkosi and Modisane are captured memorably in the discussion which follows the suggestion from “Morris” that liberals are trying to “meet us halfway”.¹² When Morris refers to the liberal point of view embodied in Paton’s book, his remarks are met with derision:

⁹ The script must have allowed for improvisation. According to Modisane, “the dialogue was not scripted, Zacharia spoke, improvising his own dialogue; the words were his own, and so was the grammar” (*Blame* 282).

¹⁰ In terms of authenticity, insight and technique it is a huge step up from Swanson’s *African Jim* (a.k.a. *Jim Comes to Jo’burg*) (1949). It is the first film to use African-language dialogue and African script writers. The title is of course a translation of the ANC slogan, “Mayibuye Afrika”.

¹¹ As documentary footage recording the more or less spontaneous interaction of three leading figures of the “Sophiatown Renaissance” (of whom only one survives) this scene from the film has a unique value. Fellow *Drum* writer Arthur Maimane comments as follows on this scene: “That was not acting, in that it happened in the shebeens every night. You know, long philosophical arguments about everything and nothing. It was our place of entertainment. You have a drink and you talk to people about anything from the latest crimes in the township to the state of the nation and the state of race relations and so forth.” (Quoted by Davis 53)

Modisane: Ja, that sickly Reverend Kumalo came to town and said “yes, baas” to every white.

[Modisane bends his head, mimicking Kumalo’s gesture. He cups his hands together in a praying motion.]

Nkosi: He never grew up. [He points to Morris.] You want to be . . . the old reverend gentleman who thinks the world of whites. . . .

(Balseiro 99)

The sequence culminates in the following indictment from Nkosi:

I’m telling you, the liberal just doesn’t want a grown-up African. He wants the sort of African he can patronise, pat on his head and tell him that “with just a little bit of luck, someday you’ll be a grown-up man, fully civilised.” He wants the African from the country, from his natural environment, unspoilt.

(Balseiro 93)

In so far as Paton’s novel displays a nostalgia for the simple, “unspoilt”, rural African, rooted in the traditions and customs of the tribe, and uncontaminated by the ways of the city, it clearly plays into a conservative agenda not far removed from that of the National Party government. At the time the film was being made, the destruction of Sophiatown was well under way – part of the attempt to control the influx of blacks into the urban areas and “retribalise” black South Africans.

Nixon acknowledges that while *Cry, the Beloved Country* may have played “a singular role in shaping an international understanding of apartheid”,¹³ it achieved “a particular local significance for the Sophiatown Renaissance” (26). The reason for this is obvious: it embodied the “missionary ethos of white trusteeship” and became “a cardinal counter-text for the Sophiatown set – it was the book they wrote against” (26).

BLOKE MODISANE

Modisane’s most significant literary achievement is undoubtedly his autobiography, *Blame me on History*, but he was also one of the first *Drum* journalists to turn to the short story. From the opening words of his first (and most memorable) *Drum* story, “The Dignity of Begging” (September 1951), he strikes a note and adopts a style of

¹² For convenience I use extracts from the dialogue transcribed by Balseiro in her chapter on *Come Back, Africa* (93-100).

writing which is very different from anything attempted by Sentso (or by earlier black writers):

The magistrate raises his eyes above the documents and plunges them like daggers into my heart. His blue eyes are shining with a brilliance that sets my heart pounding like the bass of a boogie woogie.
(11)¹⁴

As Chapman observes, these opening lines mark “the first appearance of the *Drum* style, racy, agitated, cynically amused by its own urban air. . . .” (“*Drum* and its significance” 201). Sentso’s “Pay Back” (May 1952) also opens with an accused, Hendrik, standing in the dock before a magistrate – but while Hendrik is desperate and fearful, Modisane’s protagonist displays guile and initiative. He dissembles to such good effect that the magistrate is deceived into giving him “another chance . . . a fresh start” (10). His speech is carefully pitched to appeal to the pity that Nathaniel sees on the faces before him: “I am magnificent, an answer to a film director’s dream” (11). He is, however, dismayed when the magistrate sends him to the Non-European Affairs Department to learn some “useful trade” (11):

This is not what I had bargained for, my brilliant idea has boomeranged. Why must I take a job when I can earn twice the normal wage begging? After all, what will the horses do if I must take a job? I must uphold the dignity of begging. Whoever heard of a beggar working? It’s unethical, that’s all.”
(11)

Far from being what he calls “an exploited beggar” (11), Nathaniel uses his disability to exploit others – by deliberately taking advantage of their compassion and credulity. He has every intention of continuing to “drain the life-blood of the wonderful people of that big generous city with the golden pavements” (11). His friend Richard, in contrast, lacks imagination and allows himself to be exploited by his family: “His honesty is so appalling it would make a Bishop turn green with envy” (11). What we have here is a complete and deliberate reversal of societal norms: begging is turned into a “profession” which has its own “dignity” and rules, and “honesty” is seen as a form of weakness. The idea of being “[pinned] behind a desk” in a regular job strikes

¹³ “For decades it was canonised in school curricula from Kansas to Karachi, and it has outsold every other South African literary work” (Nixon 26).

¹⁴ References are to the story as reprinted in Chapman’s *The Drum Decade*.

Mokmare as nothing less than “criminal” (12). Nathaniel is the first-person narrator of his own story, so that from the outset the reader is taken into his confidence and shares his perspective. In this way the story challenges the reader’s own (presumably more conventional) norms and assumptions. Do we approve the mocking irreverence which enables Mokmare not only to survive his disability but also to profit from it? The distance between Mokmare and Paton’s humble, pious country parson, confused and bewildered by the city, could not be greater.

It is by leaving his family and striking out on his own (as a professional beggar) that a “new life” opens up for Mokmare – yet another reversal of conventional expectations (in this case, those of traditional African society). “A new life opened up for me. I got myself a wife, a property in Pampoensfontein, and a room in Sophiatown, complete with piano. Within two years I had begged well over a hundred pounds” (12). Mokmare (like Modisane himself) is an urban sophisticate, has a love of classical music and values his “room in Sophiatown” (which enables him to create at least the appearance of independence and self-sufficiency).¹⁵ Mokmare is, among other things, a surrogate self for the author – although the “property in Pampoensfontein” suggests that (unlike Modisane) he wants to keep open the option of a return to rural life. He is, in fact, a self-made man¹⁶ and has achieved a measure of independence and dignity (in his own eyes at least) which makes him exceptional (for a black man in South Africa at that time).

As a further affront to the norms of bourgeois society, Mokmare plays the horses, and his presence at the race track undoes him: he is spotted by a social worker, arrested, brought before the magistrate and sent to the “Bantu Refuge”. The magistrate’s words to Mokmare reveal that his real offence is not to have been a beggar, but to have been so successful at it. (It would, by implication, have been acceptable had he remained poor, humble and grateful!)

¹⁵ Modisane’s Sophiatown room – incongruously situated next to his mother’s shebeen - is much commented on in the *Drum* literature. According to Sampson, “Modisane was fascinating because he was able to defy the laws of survival. He had a room in one of those backyards in Sophiatown. There was this incredibly smelly courtyard . . . and there you opened the door onto this amazingly elegant room where everything was just perfect with classical music playing and bookshelves across the wall” (*Sophiatown Speaks* 44). Modisane himself describes it as a “flyover” which connected the “two worlds” between which he moved. Reproductions of modernist art hung on its walls, books about the Impressionists lay “unobtrusively” about, and Modisane would delight in producing “American martinis served in chilled cocktail glasses” for his visitors (*Blame* 254). All this in close proximity to “the gutters of the slums” and “the swelling smells of the open drains” (*Blame* 117).

¹⁶ He advises his friend Robert, “You must plan and work for it [a room of his own] as I did” (13).

“Beggars who play the horses are a dangerous nuisance, they misuse the kindness that is showed to them. You have made begging a profession, and it is my duty to curb this occupation of yours. I am forced to send you to the Bantu Refuge.”

(14)

Through his adopted persona, Modisane exposes the dishonesty and hypocrisy of a society which will not tolerate beggars if they are successful and unrepentant – and, especially, of course, if they are *black*. The fact that this is South Africa, and that Mokmare is black (and therefore discriminated against and exploited), is assumed in the story. The unspoken assumption behind the magistrate’s words is that black people must be kept in their (subordinate) places. Here is a black beggar (Mokmare) who defies social convention, turns his disabilities to his own advantage – and succeeds brilliantly!

In his autobiography Modisane describes his determination to use his writing “as the weapon for gate-crashing into the worlds which rejected [him]” (*Blame* 88). The same sense of rejection informs the situations of Modisane, the would-be writer and intellectual, and Mokmare, the cripple who longs for recognition as a man. Both are urban sophisticates, both are debarred from full participation in society.

In my first published story, *The Dignity of Begging*, I created a satirical situation in which I sat back and laughed at the worlds which rejected. I projected myself into the character of Nathaniel Mokgomare (sic), an educated African capable of earning himself an independent living, but handicapped by being black in a society which has determined that black is the condition of being dependent on white charity, in the same sense that the cripple is dependent for his existence on public charity.

(88)

The cripple, if sufficiently deformed, may elicit public sympathy; the African, on the other hand, is “helpless in his capacity to overcome the burden of his colour” (*Blame* 88). Mokmare succeeds by exploiting his deformity and acting out a part: “His eyes plead for human kindness, but sneer behind every ‘thank you, baas; God bless you, baas’” (*Blame* 89). These are the extremes, Modisane suggests, to which Africans are reduced if they are to survive with a modicum of “dignity and sanity” in apartheid South Africa (89). Behind this one can sense an echo of the scorn expressed by Modisane and his fellow writers for those white liberals who expected their African

protégés to smile and conform to “civilised” behaviour while being patronised over a cup of tea:

I am instead insulted with multi-racial tea parties where we wear our different racial masks and become synthetically polite to each other, in a kind of masquerade where Africans are being educated into an acceptance of their inferior position.

(*Blame* 158)

“The Dignity of Begging” can be seen as an exploration – almost an allegory – of the indignities and frustrations heaped upon Africans (particularly “educated Africans”) in apartheid South Africa. Like *Blame me on History* it examines the pathology induced by institutionalised racism. Van Dyk notwithstanding, it can hardly be conceived of as “a simple didactic tale warning of the evils of the city” (in the R.R.R. Dhlomo mode) (Van Dyk 67).

Chapman makes the salient point that the figure of Mokmare has an ancient precedent, “the trickster-figure of folklore, where guile provides a psychic escape from convention while acting as a warning against anarchy” (“*Drum* and its Significance” 201). The trickster figure recurs in black South African writing, and also has a more contemporary analogue: Mokmare, the beggar who lives on his wits and triumphs over adversity, invites comparison to the *tsotsi*, that other model of urbanity and defiance. According to Modisane,

. . . the *tsotsis* . . . are perhaps the only Africans who have personal dignity; they answer white arrogance with black arrogance, they take their just deserts from a discriminating economy by robbery and pillage. The educated African is confined by academic rationalisations, the *tsotsi* is a practical realist; he is sensitive and responds to the denials and the prejudice with the only kind of logic Western man understands and respects. (*Blame* 228)¹⁷

While he concedes that he may have been writing “innocuous short stories” or “escapist trash”, his heroes, he says, were “seldom, if ever, on the side of law and order” (*Blame* 139). They were “social maladjusts in a society where heroism is measured by acts of defiance against law and order” (139). He adds, in a judgement that qualifies his verdict on his own stories: “I did not then recognise the sociological

¹⁷ I have already discussed Modisane’s comments about the appeal of the outlaw or *tsotsi* figure in relation to *Drum* writing generally.

significance of what I was doing, that with a central idea behind them I could use my stories as a reflection or study of our society” (139).

While “The Dignity of Begging” clearly does not fall into the “innocuous” or “escapist” category, the same can hardly be said for his other *Drum* stories, “The Fighter That Wore Skirts” (Jan. 1952) and “The Respectable Pickpocket” (Jan. 1954). Both stories are little more than potboilers and draw on the conventions of popular American fiction, in particular the so-called “tough tale”. The first presents the paradox of a champion boxer who is dominated by his wife and eventually gives in to her demands (she has her eye on a new furniture suite, and wants to keep up with the Chabalalas). In the end he succumbs to her feminine wiles and capitulates. The conventional “happy ending” is in the style of popular romance: “He held her in her arms and kissed the tears off her face. Neither one of them spoke, but she knew that everything was going to be all right” (37). The stock ending is, however, complicated by the reader’s recognition that from the perspective of our unhappy protagonist, everything is in fact “all wrong”: from now on he will submit tamely to his wife’s requests. The story reinforces the popular view that it is frequently the woman who “wears the pants around the house” (19) and does little to question the wife’s acquisitive impulses or materialist values.

The second story, “The Respectable Pickpocket”, adopts the laconic tone and Americanised diction of popular crime fiction. The protagonist (who, like Mokmare, is also the narrator) adopts a “coloured” name and identity and claims to come from a “respectable family” (22). This does not, however, prevent the magistrate from sentencing him to six months for vagrancy. The story is poorly motivated and generates little interest of any kind: “The Fighter That Wore Skirts” at least provided a blow-by-blow description of a boxing match, and could tap into the popular interest in this sport. The narrator here fails to engage the reader in any significant way.¹⁸ Rather than try to discover some kind of value for these particular stories – as, for example, “‘impertinent’ fiction in the face of a hostile hegemony” (Van Dyk 66) – it seems better to acknowledge that they fail to do justice to either Modisane’s literary talent or his social and psychological insight.

The story which most vividly and memorably captures Modisane’s ambivalent position is “The Situation”, first published in the Nigerian journal *Black Orpheus* in

¹⁸ Van Dyk’s view – that “the story represents the triumph of an indomitable spirit pitted against the apartheid notion of ‘baaskap’” (74) – fails to correspond in any way to my reading experience.

1963 (a few years after his departure from South Africa). The story reads rather like an episode from his autobiography, *Blame me on History* (also published in 1963).¹⁹ Modisane was what was colloquially referred to a “a situation” – defined in the *Dictionary of South African English* as “a derogatory term for an educated or professional black person, esp. one considered to be a social climber” (640). Such persons were said to “situate” themselves above ordinary, less-educated working-class Africans. In his autobiography Modisane explains the peculiar situation of someone like himself, resented by both white South Africans (because he fails to conform to their stereotype of the black man), and by other black South Africans (because of his use of English). They look upon him as belonging to neither white nor black, situated somewhere between “white oppression and black rebellion” (“The Situation” 94). In particular, the Afrikaners are “almost psychotic in their reaction to the English-speaking African, whom they accuse of talking back with insolence and aping the white man” (94). According to Modisane, “the devices of humiliating into submission the arrogant African are various” (94) – and his short story demonstrates the ritualised humiliation that even (or especially) the educated African is likely to be subjected to at any time on the streets of Johannesburg. His protagonist, Caiaphas Sedumo – clearly another surrogate self – has achieved everything that Modisane himself would have wanted to achieve,²⁰ and when we meet him he is (temporarily) “at peace with himself”, enjoying “an emotional truce” with South Africa:

He did not feel black; a master’s degree in applied psychology, the university accent, a white job with an advertising firm, and the expensive suit he was wearing, were adequate compensation; and but for the physical reality of his colour, he would be white. His eyes lowered down to his feet; the new shoes, American – Bostonians. Appropriately expensive. (10)

Caiaphas seeks to “compensate” for the inferiority associated with “blackness” by trying to prove himself in terms of “white” standards (of education, civility, dress, employment, etc); in effect, he tries to escape the stigma attached to his skin colour by

¹⁹ In discussing *Blame me on History* and introducing it as evidence, I am of course aware that the “Modisane” of the autobiography is a textual construct and cannot be equated in any simple way with the actual individual who bore that name, carried a Reference Book, and worked for *Drum* magazine in the 1950s. Modisane’s autobiography in fact reveals a sophisticated awareness of the extent to which one’s identity is a construct, and explores the way in which one assumes a variety of masks, or acts a particular part or role. Who, actually, is this “Bloke” called “Modisane”?

turning himself – in every significant respect – into a white man. This conflict – the burden of blackness/the desire for whiteness – is a recurring theme of Modisane’s autobiography : “White is the standard of civilisation . . . and black is the badge of ignorance and savagery” (*Blame* 59). Modisane feels “helpless in the coffin of his skin” and wishes that he were white (*Blame* 36), but is too involved in “the dynamics of being black in South Africa” for this to be possible (*Blame* 86). His Sophiatown room – with its books, its prints, its music and its champagne on ice – is a statement of his desire to escape his “blackness”: “All this was done for the pleasure of hearing them say, Bloke, you’re a white man; why not, if I could not be white physically and legally, I could pretend to a white existence” (*Blame* 254).

Like Modisane, Caiaphas pretends to a white existence, and the story records the brutality with which this pretence is stripped from him: ““Look at it – this monkey standing before us,”” the voice behind him said, in Afrikaans. ““Let’s push it away”” (“The Situation” 10). When Caiaphas turns to look at his tormentors, he is greeted with, ““What are you looking at, kaffir”” (10). They are “coarse Afrikaners – farmers probably” and what drives their resentment and hatred is that Caiaphas is actually better dressed (and more educated) than they are. His mere presence, dressed in his expensive suit, and occupying the same urban space as they do, is provocation enough. Within a short space of time a crowd has gathered – a potential lynch mob. To save himself from further humiliation (or worse) Caiaphas adopts the submissive pose of the “good kaffir” who “knows his place”:

“I sorry, baasie,” he pleaded in Afrikaans. “Very sorry, my king, my crown.” The back of his hand touched his forehead in liegement.

The hardness in their eyes softened, the anger uncurling itself on their faces.

“I good Native, my baas – not tsotsi,” he said, his head shaking stupidly, emphatically. “Ek spuit, my baas; sorry, my crown. Asseblief, let me go, my baasie.” (10)

Modisane explains in his autobiography, “We wear masks of submission and servility We transform into the traditional good Native” (55). Even this self-abasement does not bring Caiaphas’s ordeal to an end. Two police constables arrive, ask what he has stolen and demand to see his pass: ““Pass, kaffir”” (11). Whatever his status (in

²⁰ “If I had my life again,” says Modisane, “although I would select to be black, I would want a university education, to read philosophy, social psychology and history” (*Blame* 218).

his own eyes, or those of his peers), in the eyes of the law Caiaphas is no better than any other black man.²¹ Like the speaker in Mtshali's "Always a Suspect", Caiaphas knows that on the streets of Johannesburg he is automatically a suspect.

His ritualised humiliation is witnessed by an "elderly African" with a furrowed face who advises, "It matters nothing, teacher – it's nothing, they're not like people" (11). The old man addresses Caiaphas respectfully as "teacher", and suggests that he makes his education his "assegai to stab forward to a better life" (11). Caiaphas, however, is in no mood to receive this counsel of patience. His (unspoken) response reveals the full impact of his humiliation:

Wretched old man, it means more than you dare admit; it means everything, it means I live with the emasculating truth that I am a coward. I lost my manhood back there in the crowd; it was a ceremony of castration, even the white women there looked at me with sympathetic contempt. (11)

Castration and impotence are recurring images in Modisane's autobiography, which he describes at one point as his "confessional emasculation": he fears that it may one day arouse a loathing in his daughter "for me, for our ancestors, for anything black, including herself" (76).

When Caiaphas finally gets back to his room in Sophiatown, he collapses on his bed and stares for hours at the ceiling: "The incident with the farmers had demolished him" (12). The shebeen seems to offer solace (or escape): "The sound and smell of Friday night filtered through the darkness, titillating with the promise of forgetfulness. Pick up a girl, and in the energy of sex diffuse the anger and the humiliation" (12). Caiaphas can "lose [himself]" in the "cacophony of noise" and "diminish [himself] with drink" (12).

In the shebeen he encounters members of "the Americans" and is questioned by Deadeye Dick, "the deadliest gun in Sophiatown" (12): "Heit, Situation, how's the farmers?" (12). News of his encounter earlier that day has spread, and he finds himself (again) exposed to a hostile interrogation: "'Bloody Situation. What's wrong

²¹ In his Postscript to *Blame me on History*, Modisane explains that his pass signifies his servitude or bondage in the land of his birth: "The pass or Reference Book is a life of its own, a kind of indestructible monster; its relationship to the African is one of indecent intimacy, it controls his entire life, strangulates his ambition; it is his physical life" (307). His desire to take his wife and daughter out of South Africa is driven by the need to rescue them from servitude: "South Africa shall not have her

with you Situations actually? All you do is talk English – situation this, situation that; situating all the bloody time. You’ve got no pluck” (12). The people who command power and respect in the world of the shebeen are not the educated misfits but the gangsters who rule with the gun and recycle goods from the “white” economy. The “Battleship” (the shebeen queen) is perceptive enough to recognise his estrangement, and offers some salient advice:

“You’re not one of them, and they resent it. Don’t bite me, I’m reporting. Look, you went to university, they didn’t; you’re in an executive job, most of them are messengers. You speak English. All these are white privileges. . . . Talk their language, talk to them in the dialect of the *tsotsis*; they’re not fools, Caiaphas, talking to them in English is to situate yourself above them.” (13)²²

Their attitude to him is a complex mix of envy, admiration, scorn and resentment.

The narrative reveals the tensions between rival gang members, but these fade away as everyone surrenders to the “frenzy of the nice time; the singing, the dancing, the drinking, had a compulsive joyousness about it . . .” (15).²³ Maughan-Brown repeats this phase in his critique of what he calls “the Sophiatown myth”: “We need insight into what one might call the pathology of compulsive joyousness as an escape from social circumstances” (“The Anthology as Reliquary” 7). Modisane’s story contextualises this “pathology”: the liquor and the music and the dancing provide a release or escape from the tensions and frustrations of everyday life – but they also suggest an affirmation of life amidst poverty and oppression. The story provides a thinly fictionalised evocation of the shebeen culture that was a crucial constituent of “the swarming, cacophonous, strutting, brawling, vibrating life of the Sophiatown that was” (Themba, “Requiem for Sophiatown” 104).

Towards the end of the story Deadwood Dick demands that Caiaphas perform for them: “Caiaphas, you’re a situation, speak some English, nice words” (15). His first effort – a speech from *Hamlet* – is rejected: what they want is “the one of Brando, the one of the Romans” (15). They interrupt his performance several times

[his daughter]; I will take my family out of Sophiatown, out of South Africa, to a place where Chris shall start out as a human being. I refuse to commit her to slavery.” (75)

²² Caiaphas had in fact addressed them in *tsotsitaal*, the dialect of the streets, and been rebuffed anyway.

²³ This description is echoed and elaborated in Modisane’s autobiography: “Sophiatown was like our nice-time parties or the sound of the penny whistle, a mounting compulsion to joyousness, but always with a hint of pain. . . . We did not live in it, we were Sophiatown” (9).

with demands for encores. On the one hand, his role resembles that of the court jester or licensed fool; on the other hand, as he launches into Anthony's funeral oration, the gap between him and his audience closes as they enter into in the performance. Modisane described himself as having been "literally raised inside the cinema" (*Blame* 169).²⁴ One is again reminded of the enormous impact of Hollywood on the life and culture of Sophiatown. Here the cinema functions – rather unexpectedly – as an agent for disseminating Shakespeare, the icon of high culture, and forges an unexpected link with the Sophiatown's shebeen culture.²⁵

Finally, the narrative moves from Shakespeare to the blues – another reminder of the intimate connections between the African-American and black South African experiences:

Caiaphas was overwhelmed by the animation of their joy, the somistic enjoyment of being black; wallowing in their blackness, working themselves up into a frenzy, handclapping the down tempo of the blues beat. The hint of pain in the shrill noise of their joy united them in the love-hate relationship with the colour black. In his conscious denial of the black in him, Caiaphas felt the outsider – the intruder – situated some distance from all that enjoyment. The stanzas were being repeated over and over, the motions rising; the self-pitying and robustness of the blues tempo mounting, the people working themselves into a state of dizziness. Caiaphas sneaked out. He was alone – walking back to his little room. (16)

This interior drama ends not in community, or in an affirmation of blackness, but in separation and withdrawal. Caiaphas retreats to the isolation of his room. He is (to use another of Modisane's attempts at self-definition) "not white enough to be European, too respectable to be black" (*Blame* 140).

Modisane's short story, like his autobiography, is remarkable for the unflinching way in which it explores the psychic and social consequences of being black, educated and aspirant middle class in a white world – a quasi-colonial world defined by white culture, white standards, white civilisation – and white power. His contemporaries, and the *Drum* journalists in particular, shared this predicament, so

²⁴ In fact, at one time or another both Modisane and Mattera worked as ushers at the local cinema.

²⁵ Other commentators have also remarked on the gangsters' appreciation of Shakespeare and on the perceived resemblance between life in Sophiatown and "the cacophonous, swaggering world of Elizabethan England" (Nkosi, *Home and Exile* 13). Nkosi seems here to be echoing both Themba's description of Sophiatown (quoted above) and Sampson's comparison of life in Sophiatown to the world of Elizabethan drama and Shakespeare's London (*Drum* 80).

that Modisane's situation becomes paradigmatic of the situation of the black intellectual or artist in the South Africa of the 1950s.

CAN THEMBA

Themba sprang to prominence with the publication of his prize-winning story, "Mob Passion", in the April 1953 edition of *Drum*. The judges for this competition (announced in *Drum* in October 1951) were none other than Alan Paton, R.R.R. Dhlomo and Peter Abrahams, and over 1000 stories were submitted from all over Africa. This suggests the presence of a modernising, urban audience eager to read stories in English that in some way reflect their situation. It also creates an opportunity for a number of aspiring writers eager to contribute their stories and establish a name for themselves. It is *Drum's* distinction that it provided an outlet and an audience for these stories, and in doing so it contradicts Newell's contention that African popular literature necessarily circulates "within a narrow geographical radius determined by the publisher's or author's mobility and marketing ability" ("Introduction" 1). Her remarks do, however, provide a useful context for the consideration of those stories of Themba's which most obviously appeal to a popular audience and reproduce some of the generic features of popular fiction. The most interesting of these stories, which often follow the "popular romance" formula, is "Mob Passion" (the story which, along with "The Suit", has attracted the most critical commentary).

The opening paragraph introduces us to a recurring situation in South African short fiction by black writers, the difficulty and danger of commuting by train. The protagonist, Linga, is identified as a "young student who was ever inwardly protesting about some wrong or other" (*Drum Decade* 33); his girlfriend Mapula, is a nurse in training. This immediately suggests a familiar typology, and one which *Drum* readers would have readily understood and identified with – the idealistic young student, eager to change the world, and the supportive female partner whose career choice (nursing) makes her an appropriate partner. Linga and Mapula are, potentially, an ideal, modern couple, ready to take up the challenges and responsibilities of finding their way in urban society. When Linga confides his hopes and fears to Mapula, the discourse he adopts is that of African nationalism in its first, most idealistic phase (the key terms are "brotherhood", "nation", "vision", "destiny" (34)). He closely resembles another idealistic young would-be leader of his nation, Obi Okonkwo, the

protagonist of Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (written a few years after Themba's story, but clearly reflecting the optimism and idealism of the period immediately preceding African independence).

Mapula is apparently content to play a supportive role: she wants nothing more than to be a home-maker and offer support and love to her idealistic (and rather fragile) partner: "I dream about the home we are going to have You taught me that woman's greatest contribution to civilisation so far has been to furnish homes where great men and great ideas are developed" (34). Clearly she has internalised the prevailing masculinist norms of both her traditional culture and black petit-bourgeois society; she leaves politics (the realm of "ideas") to her would-be husband.

The two young lovers find a shady spot by a stream and "[flee] into each other's arms. . . . These two daring hearts were lost to each other. The world, too . . . was forgotten in the glorious flux of their souls meeting and mingling" (33). Themba deliberately deploys the clichés of pulp fiction – evidence (if any were needed) of his conscious adaptation of the conventions of popular romance. This private, rural idyll is then juxtaposed against the violence of the public world, which irrupts in the form of a lynch mob of "Russians".²⁶ The story presents a pair of star-crossed lovers whose romantic interlude is threatened by the feuding between, in this case, two rival ethnic groups (the "Russians" and the "Letebeles"). Themba was thoroughly conversant with Shakespeare, and no doubt had *Romeo and Juliet* in mind as prototype.²⁷

The conflict between feuding, ethnically defined groups is presented in terms which echo familiar racist stereotypes;

Everywhere there were white policemen, heavily armed. The situation was "under control", but everyone knew that in the soul of almost every being in this area raved a seething madness, wild and passionate, with the causes lying deep. . . . These jovial faces could change without warning into masks of bloodlust and destruction, without warning, with the smallest provocation. . . . Each evening [these people] would return to a devil's party, uncontrollably drawn into hideous orgies. (33)

This seems to reflect the representations to be found in the pages of colonialist fiction, with its primitivist resort to racial stereotyping and innate savagery as an explanation

²⁶ The "Russians" were Basotho mine workers or migrants who banded together, partly in self-defence, and resorted to vigilante-type actions across the townships on the Reef. Their headquarters was Newclare, the epicentre of the violence which is described in Themba's story.

²⁷ This is suggested by the reference to love which "in its mysterious, often ill-starred ways had flung them together" (33).

for “black-on-black” violence. If Themba is satirising these conventions and this style of writing, this is not evident in the text. One cannot help but wonder whether Themba’s treatment of his subject-matter may have been influenced by the reporting of “Mau Mau rebellion” in Kenya, which broke out in October 1952 and played into colonialist fears and perceptions of “the dark continent”.²⁸ An extraordinary feature of the passage is the positioning of policemen, identified as “white”, as upholders of law and order and keepers of the peace. If Themba were consciously attempting a rationalisation for apartheid, he could hardly have done better!²⁹ Themba’s most sympathetic critics are disconcerted by such passages. Chapman notes that Themba’s writing “frequently presents this problem”, and remarks that “white society has always been eager to see so-called black-on-black violence as non-sociological and evidence of innate African savagery” (“*Drum* and its Significance” 208). Does Themba intend the reader to take this description at face value? Is he yielding to the temptation to sensationalise his material, in the process drawing on current racist discourse? Can he have internalised the racist assumptions that seem to be present at various points in the story? Is he attempting to distance himself from ordinary working-class township dwellers who may have been more susceptible to ethnic manipulation?

As a reporter Themba *was* clearly aware of the sociological and political factors underlying these outbreaks of inter-ethnic or gang-related violence. In “Terror on the Trains” Themba explores the causes of violence in the Dube area (of Soweto), where “prop-eared Zulus” formed gangs to defend themselves from “train robbers, and tsotsis in general” (“Terror” 114). He goes on to ask, “What caused this sudden, violent explosion?” and attributes it to “the policy of ethnic grouping, which has led the more tribal among us to think of other tribes as foreigners, enemies” (“Terror” 115). However, even here we find socio-political information juxtaposed with the kind of sensational language that occurs in “Mob Passion”:

The police were kept busy day and night keeping the blood-mad warriors from each other The two sides are threatening to go on fighting until Christmas, which will become the Devil’s Dance in this bloody affair. They must be stopped!
(“Terror” 115)

²⁸ Maughan-Brown refers to this possibility in his review article, “The Anthology as Reliquary?” (9).

²⁹ One should of course recognize that it would hardly have been possible for *Drum* to position itself in opposition to the police, ostensibly there to maintain law and order, however problematic this claim may be.

Similarly, “Inside Dube Hostel” gives a first-hand account to the factors that had brought about “riots” and “fear”. These include the deliberately provocative behaviour of the “tsotsis” who disguise themselves as both Zulus and “Russians” in order to foment violence. Underlying this, we are told, is the policy of ethnic grouping: “The tribes must be kept apart” (117). (Both Zulu and Xhosa-speakers would have been included in the pejorative term “Letebele”, employed in “Mob Passion”.) Towards the end of this article Themba quotes the words of a hostel resident who calls for the abolition of the hostel system, and identifies the socio-economic problems it fosters:

“We can’t have on our doorstep a cage with people who live in herds, who don’t live with women, who cook hit-and-run meals and have only a beer-yard for their nightly entertainment. Something had to break in a big way. Dube must go!”

(“Terror” 119)

In “Mob Passion” this more sober analysis is largely absent: Themba seems to deliberately exploit the sensational possibilities offered by his material. This also serves his thematic purpose, which is to contrast the unthinking behaviour of people swept up by “mob passion” with the calmer reflection which takes place when all passion is spent and people are again able to feel and think as individuals - and become conscious of the horrifying consequences of their actions (Linga is dead, a victim of mob violence, and Mapula has buried an axe in the neck of “Uncle Alpheus”). The implicit plea is for a recognition of our common humanity – only this, it seems, will enable one to overcome the fear, ignorance and suspicion engendered by apartheid. The story provides evidence of Themba’s underlying humanism, but also of his propensity to sensationalise the events which form the core of his narrative.

In one respect, the story effectively subverts prevailing essentialist beliefs.³⁰ Linga sees a group of “Russians” approaching him, intent on revenging the wrongs that (they believe) have been done to them. In order to avert what seems to be an imminent attack, Linga, who speaks fluent Sesotho, ties a white handkerchief around his head and successfully passes himself off as a “Russian”. The irony here is that the “horde” of Russians cannot tell the difference: they identify him as “a child of [their]

³⁰ The prevalence of ethnic thinking is illustrated by the popular song which Themba reproduces in his article “Inside Dube Hostel”: “You give birth to a Mosotho./ Then you give birth to a spy./ You give birth to a Zulu./ Then you give birth to a watchman./ You give birth to a coloured./ Then you give birth to a drunk./ You give birth to a Xhosa, Then you give birth to a thief” (118).

home” and offer their help (“Mob Passion” 37). By implication, what separates them from Linga is more imaginary than the real. Tragically, Mapula’s efforts to protect Linga lead directly to his death. However naïve or even retrogressive the implied racial and gender politics of the story may seem, we need, as Chapman suggests,³¹ to recognise the force of Themba’s humanism, especially given the context of the 1950s.

Critics differ in their estimation of Themba’s stories. Nkosi accuses Themba of being “annoyingly shiftless, throwing off cheap potboilers when magazines demanded them” (*Home and Exile* 138). According to Mphahlele, “Can Themba is basically *Drum*: romantic imagery, theatrical characters, Hollywood, with a lace of poetic justice” (“Black and White” 343). Themba’s projection of the romance formula onto the South African situation does, however, show some kind of engagement with social and political realities. In his *Drum* stories the obstacles to the lovers’ union arise from traditional attitudes to marriage (“Passionate Stranger”), race prejudice (“Forbidden Love”), or the ethnic divisions fostered by apartheid (“Mob Passion”). On these grounds Van Dyk claims that “Passionate Stranger” is “progressive in its vision” (80). Rabkin, on the other hand, finds it difficult to take this story seriously (115). His response is understandable, given the story’s cliché-ridden diction and the obvious exploitation of the stereotypes and conventions of popular romance. Here is Reggie’s declaration of love to Ellen:

Ellen, I am in love. I needed to escape the smoke and filth, the misery and degradation of Johannesburg to discover that something fresh and sweet is still possible in womanhood. . . . Love is on the wing, and whether I will it or no, I must love you. Destiny itself has guided my wanderings to this far place, that I may lay my troubles in your bosom.
(*World of Can Themba* 41-42)

It is difficult to believe that Themba did not have his tongue firmly in his cheek while writing this!

What makes an informed assessment of these stories difficult is our awareness of the intellectual and social distance between the author and the *Drum* readers for whom he was writing. The popular writer in Africa is usually not too far removed from his (or her) readers in terms of education and sophistication. One of the best-known examples of popular literature in Africa is Onitsha Market Literature, which

³¹ “In this context, Themba’s unalloyed humanism has considerable social import” (“*Drum* and its

“fed the voracious book hunger of young urban Nigerians who had recently left school after acquiring a primary school education” (Newell 2). Much of this literature deals with issues of morality and conduct – the very issues which their readers would be grappling with in their own lives. As such, these stories have an obvious informative and didactic function. Obiechina notes the popularity of marriage as a theme in Onitsha market pamphlets, and observes that the impulse which leads the pamphlet authors to champion Western marriage practices also “propels them towards an undisguised acceptance and promotion of notions of romantic love” (18). This should caution us against dismissing too easily a story like “Passionate Stranger”, dealing as it does with the issues of generational conflict and arranged marriages. At the end of the story Ellen stands up and refuses the marriage which her father and the tribal elders are in the process of arranging. The popular romance genre rests on the assumption of individuality and freedom of choice; in its own way, Themba’s story pits modernity against the traditions customs of the tribe. Nixon’s point, that *Drum* “advocated Western romantic love as a prestigious marker of modernity,” seems apposite here (20).

If Themba’s literary output were to be judged simply on the basis of this group of stories, then there may be some grounds for the dismissive attitude of various critics. In fact, his writing has considerable range and variety. In “Marta”, published in *Drum* in July 1956, we see Themba moving from popular romance to realism as he explores the shebeen culture in which he was himself immersed. Unlike “The Nice Time Girl” (May 1954), “Marta” is a more serious exploration of the costs of this lifestyle, and develops some understanding for the situation of Martha.³² Her marriage to Jackson is represented in stark but convincing terms: both are victims of “the tawdry, vulgar, violent recklessness of their lives” (122); Martha’s drinking and his adulteries are part of the problem. When he assaults her, concern for Marta and her child is mixed in with his anger and frustration.

The story turns on the developing relationship between Marta and a young man she meets in the shebeen. She dances to the jazz solo which he improvises on a

Significance” 208).

³² “Marta” was described by *Drum* as “D. Can Themba’s first story of life in the racy shebeens of Sophiatown” (July 1956; the quote is taken from Stephen Gray’s note on the story, *Requiem for Sophiatown* xi).

drum set.

The others chanted out for her. Marta's arms went out before her, her legs spread, her knees sagged, her eyes drooped, her mouth opened a little, and she moved forwards in a shuffle like a creature drawn irresistibly, half-consciously, to its doom. (*The Drum Decade* 123)

At moments like this the distance between Themba and the previous generation of black writers (one thinks particularly of Dhlomo) is not as great a one might imagine. As Titlestad points out, "contrary to his own philosophy of enlightening transgression, those of his protagonists who lapse into carnivalesque are destined only for depravity and eventual ruin" (44). For whatever reason, Themba "reiterates the moral scheme that places jazz on the side of excess, desirous abandon and, consequently, suffering" (44). Somewhat improbably, perhaps, the young man in this story has a shy, innocent quality which Marta recognises and respects: "Somehow, she felt this boy should not be dragged into their company" (124). She gets him to promise that he won't drink or "go rough" (125). When Jackson arrives back he assumes she has been unfaithful to him and kills the young man. The popular verdict is "No case at all" (i.e. Jackson had every right to kill him). Marta (like Mapula in "Mob Passion") has unwittingly brought about the young man's death. The story explores in a non-sensational manner the attraction and the devastation which can result from the abandonment of restraint and the urge to live life to the full – "sweetly or bitterly – but always intensely" (122). If anything, "Marta" implicitly critiques the conventions and stereotypes of popular romance.

Themba's most carefully considered short story is probably "The Suit", published not in *Drum* but in the *The Classic*, the literary magazine edited by Nat Nakasa, in 1963.³³ The story provides a striking contrast with the more rudimentary "Marta": it is essentially a psychological study of a young husband's response to the discovery of his wife's infidelity. The story presents us with what seems to be a model couple who enjoy a modern marriage characterised by mutual love, respect and consideration. In stark contrast to the couple in "Marta", they have managed to construct this ideal marriage amidst the privation and squalor of Sophiatown (their lean-to is situated in yard which they share with twenty or thirty families). The

³³ It is, according to Gray, "perhaps the most reproduced piece of fiction of his generation" ("Notes on Sources" xiii).

husband, Philemon, cheerfully goes about his household chores, and takes pleasure in bringing his wife breakfast in bed, in what seems a deliberate reversal of traditional roles: “He denied that he was one of those who believed in putting your wife in her place even if she was a good wife” (*The World of Can Themba* 85).

Philemon’s response to the revelation of his wife’s infidelity suggests how fragile or precarious his equilibrium actually is: “It was more like the critical breakdown in an infinitely delicate piece of mechanism” (87). His world has been turned upside down: “The bus ride home was a torture of numb dread and suffocating despair” (87). He catches his wife *in flagrante*; the visitor manages to escape via the bedroom window, but leaves his suit behind. This suit becomes the instrument of a refined system of torture, as the husband exacts a “civilised” revenge on his wife, and punishes her for her infidelity: “There’s to be no violence in this house, if you and I can help it” (89). Their life together becomes a ghastly parody of the happy marriage they once enjoyed: the suit is present at meals, and has to be served by the wife. It even accompanies them on a Sunday excursion through the streets of Sophiatown. In desperation, Matilda persuades Philemon to allow her to join a cultural club for married women, and with this new venture her personality blossoms. Philemon even allows her to hold a lavish dinner party for her new friends – but is remorseless in insisting that even on this occasion his wife perform the ritual of serving food to their “visitor”, the suit. This humiliation is more than she can bear; Philemon returns from the beerhall that night to find that she has taken her life. Too late, the enormity of what he has done bursts in on him, and the story ends with his cry of anguish. Ironically, his subtle regime of psychological torture is far more devastating than any overt violence would have been. The story offers a somewhat chilling insight into the male psyche, its vulnerability, and its capacity for cruelty. The question which is posed, but left unanswered, is: “What makes a woman like this experiment with adultery?” (90). How much space or autonomy has Matilda been allowed in her marriage by her over-solicitous husband? Does his conduct towards her perhaps amount to a form of control, or entrapment? How “ideal” was their marriage, in fact? There are no easy answers to the questions raised, but in its avoidance of cliché or stereotypical or sensational representation, the story demonstrates Themba’s potential as a writer – a potential which a combination of circumstances, both personal and political, conspired to cut short.

Two further stories should be mentioned as further indications of the range and variety of Themba's fictional writing. "Ten-to-Ten" was first published in 1972 in *The Will to Die* (four years after Themba's death); the source was a typescript supplied by his widow, Anne Themba. It seems to have been written in exile in Swaziland, along the three other pieces, also published for the first time in *The Will to Die* ("Kwashiorkor", "Crepuscle" and "The Will to Die". The story also establishes a perhaps unexpected link with Mphahlele, who (like Themba) grew up in Marabastad, a township outside Pretoria. We can assume that Themba had read Mphahlele's autobiography, *Down Second Avenue* (1959), and his story refers to Second Avenue, the street where Mphahlele lived with his grandmother and Aunt Dora. It is quite possible that the story may even have been suggested by a passage in *Down Second Avenue* (in the first "Interlude") where Mphahlele recalls the sound of the "ten to ten" curfew bell and the fear that it would inspire: "I can hear the big curfew bell at the police station peal 'ten to ten, ten to ten, ten to ten' for the Black man to be out of the streets to be at home to be out of the policeman's reach" (*Down Second Avenue* 45). The central character in Themba's story is a policeman who is called "Ten-to-Ten" after the curfew which it is his duty to impose, and one of the story's more striking features is its attempt to explore the consciousness of this policeman as he goes about his work and reflects on his situation. The man is a township legend: stories of his deeds circulate among the residents of Marabastad, and he inspires fear, awe or admiration, depending on the circumstances. A feature of the story is its seemingly authentic recycling of these anecdotes:

They say the desk sergeant at the police station decided that very day to make Ten-to-Ten a policeman, and Marabastad became a peaceful location.

This is the kind of story you do not have to believe to enjoy.
(*The World of Can Themba* 64)

The occasional use of the first person plural pronoun adds to the sense of authenticity, and gives the story a semi-autobiographical feel. The writing has the immediacy of first-hand observation and experience behind it, and this clearly derives from Themba's memories of his early years in Marabastad.

Midway through the story the perspective alters, as "Ten-to-Ten" becomes the (not entirely convincing) focaliser for the second part of the narrative. He reflects on the need to work and on his peculiar position as a policeman:

What do I want in this job, anyway. It's a bastard of a job. Funny hours, low pay, strange orders that make no sense, violence, ever violence, and the daily spectacle of the degradation of my people. Well, I suppose it's a job Hell, if I hadn't taken this job, I'm sure I would be in jail now.

(*The World of Can Themba* 70-71)

It is as if the mute and enigmatic figure of Constable Tefo (in Mphahlele's "Down the Quiet Street") had suddenly been rendered articulate. In stark contrast with, for example, the stories of Mtutuzeli Matshoba, both this story and "Down the Quiet Street" attempt a sympathetic exploration of the compromised situation of a black South African policeman.

"The Urchin", published in *Drum* in 1963 when Themba was already in Swaziland, effectively explores the situation of Macala, a young gangster or *tsotsi*-in-the-making (a recurring topic in the pages of *Drum*). The demolition of Sophiatown forms the backdrop against which this group of young thugs (Macala is only ten) act out their fantasies of power and control; the only way for them to assert themselves and gain respect is to assume the mantle of the gangster. The older *tsotsis* shout encouragement as they swagger down Victoria Street on the way to their confrontation with the Berliners: " 'Da men who rule the town!' 'Tomorrow's outees!'" (*The World of Can Themba* 103-104). Their repartee is derived in part from Hollywood movies, and in part from the local argot of the townships, *tsotsitaal*, and marks them as urban, slick, and sophisticated. As they move down the street they could be re-enacting a scene from a Western: they fill the street "from pavement to pavement as if they were a posse. Silent. Full of purpose. Deliberately grim" (103). At the same time the story suggests that this is an act, a pose. Their alarm when they discover that one of the Berliners in dead is unmistakable:

Despite all their bravado, all their big-shot stances and their blistering contempt for cops and the law, there is one thing that this knighthood really fears, and it was expressed by a crackling of interjections from each according to his own lights: 'Six lashes and reformatory!'

(106)

They are boys playing at being men, but their play-acting results in death, and marks a point of no return in their young lives.

The story is notable for the way in which Themba enters imaginatively into the world of these township "urchins", captures the flavour and style of their repartee –

and avoids passing judgement. One of the most successful scenes is Boy-Boy's dramatic re-enactment of the (imagined) capture of the notorious township outlaw, Bura Mpedi – “the mirror and form of almost all young Sophiatown” (101)³⁴ by the police. (Ironically, it is suggested that Mpedi in fact surrendered rather tamely.) Mpedi is the prototype of many a township gangster, and a reminder of the status of such figures in township lore and legend.³⁵ The story reveals the world of the township urchin from the inside, as it were, and eschews the kind of solemn sociological information sometimes offered as an explanation for these youngsters' resort to criminality. This kind of analysis is alluded to in the description of Boy Boy (“He looked like a social worker's explanation of ‘conditions in the slums’: thin to malnourished, delinquent, undisciplined, dedicated to a future gallows” (99-100)) – but its validity is immediately undercut by the information that his father was an “important man” and his mother a teacher (100). The implication is that we should be careful about reducing the individuality and vitality of these “urchins” by fitting them to a social worker's template. The story is itself an argument for another kind of truth (imaginative truth).

As other critics have noted, in the case of the *Drum* writers it is often difficult to clearly demarcate fiction from reportage, especially when their daily assignments brought them into contact with material that would be reworked in their fiction. Conversely, techniques associated with fiction would often find their way into their reportage, in a manner that anticipates the work of the American “New Journalists”. Chapman observes that “the entire *Drum* writing exercise forces us to examine assumptions about story-telling forms and purposes”, and he goes on to show how a report like “Let the People Drink” has a “recognisably fictionalised texture (*Drum* and its Significance” 195).

Two stories in particular illustrate this aspect of Themba's work. “The Dube Train” (first published in *Modern African Stories* in 1964) is one of the most vivid and focussed of Themba's pieces of writing. Is it fiction, or is it a first-hand eye-witness report of an incident that actually happened one Monday morning on the Dube train? It draws on very much the same material as his earlier journalistic piece, “Terror in

³⁴ The Shakespearean echo is typical of Themba, and the story reflects Themba's own fascination with language.

³⁵ An obvious real-life counterpart would be George Mbalweni, better known as “Kort Boy”, who was the leader of the Americans. He served eighteen years in prison for murder. His interview with members of the Junction Avenue Theatre Company can be found in *Sophiatown Speaks* (65-71).

the Trains” (*Drum* 1957), and a comparison between the two pieces is instructive. “Terror on the Trains” employs various fictional devices. The opening paragraphs introduce us to “Isaac Mokoetsi of Dube” who has joined the “hordes” jostling to board the Dube train, his pay packet hidden in his inside coat pocket (*The World of Can Themba* 111). As befits a fictional character, we are given some insight into his feelings – in particular his “uneasy sinking feeling” at having to board a township train (111). But after the first three paragraphs Isaac disappears; he has served his purpose, which was to engage the reader’s interest. The reporter’s commentary takes over, and we move from the specific to the general as we contemplate the predicament of workers like Isaac, for whom “pay day is panic day” (112).

Frequent shifts in narrative perspective are a striking feature of “Terror on the Trains” – from that of Isaac (relayed by the narrator) to the second person point of view (“More likely as not you will not feel anything as you struggle for breath” (112)), to the first-person-plural perspective of the reporter/narrator and his associate(s) as they board a train at Park Station: “The other day we went to see for ourselves” (112). This latter perspective provides the immediacy and vividness of the eye-witness report: “I saw a man poised on the platform like a baseball pitcher. Then he flung a missile. Crash!” (113). Finally, we get the perspective of the detached reporter, whose purpose is to convey information and offer an analysis of the problem. Conventionally, we would expect this to be the dominant perspective, but in this case detachment and objectivity are difficult. The narrative position shifts from empathetic witness to anecdotal storyteller to detached observer to sociological analyst – all of which suggests the reporter’s own difficult subject position: he is himself trapped in the very circumstances he is describing. If this is reporting, it is reporting of an unusually engaged kind, and the writing has a distinctly fictionalised texture.

Why are we more likely to read “The Dube Train” as a short story?³⁶ Firstly, the point of view (it is a first-person narrative) remains consistent throughout the story. The advantages of the eye-witness report are obvious: a feature of the story is the vividness with which the narrator registers the details of the unfolding drama. The “hulk of a man” sitting opposite the narrator continues to live in the reader’s

³⁶ Essop Patel, the editor of *The World of Can Themba*, clearly regards “The Dube Train” as fictional: he places it under the heading “Short Stories”, whereas “Terror on the Trains” is among the articles grouped together as “Journalism”. It was first published in *Modern African Stories*, co-edited by Mphahlele (1964). Rather misleadingly, Gray refers to the story as a “reworking” of “Terror on the Trains” (*Requiem* xv).

imagination long after one has stopped reading the story (*The World of Can Themba* 34). The witness narrator is a familiar fictive device (deriving of course from the historical eye-witness); here we do not necessarily identify the narrator with the author – although clearly Themba is likely to be drawing on personal experience. Secondly, the sequential narrative comprises one discrete episode, and this together with the consistent narrative perspective, helps to create the unity of effect that one often associates with the short story. Thirdly, the story seems to be more than just a vivid eye-witness report of an actual event. The particular event becomes representative, and the narrator's laconic concluding comment indicates the extent to which the extraordinary has been naturalised: "It was just an incident in the morning Dube train" (39). The story implicitly questions the commuters' failure to respond or intervene: they allow themselves to be cowed by a youth who is little more than a "street urchin" (although clearly dangerous). It is left to the "hulk" to put him in his place and assert a traditional order of values, in which respect for women is central: "*Hela*, you street urchin, that woman is your mother" (38).

Built into the story is a critique of the responses of ordinary people (and by extension *Drum* readers) to reports of sensational crime events. "Odd, that no one expressed sympathy for the boy or the man. They were just greedily relishing the thrilling episode of the morning" (39). To what extent did *Drum's* commercial success in fact depend on exciting and satisfying their readers' appetite for sensation? To what extent did this dictate the kind of stories *Drum* chose to publish? One is mindful here of Mphahlele's criticism of what he called *Drum's* "arbitrary standard of what the African wants to read: sex, crime and love stories" (*Down Second Avenue* 187). Any reader who brings to this story what Culler calls "an implicit understanding of the operations of literary discourse" is likely to regard "The Dube Train" as a short story, rather than simply a piece of journalistic reporting. This helps to account for its continuing interest for us as contemporary readers.

Finally, it is relevant to note the extent to which the story assumes a reader with a repertoire of local cultural knowledge. The "township girl" and the "tsotsi" hardly need detailed characterisation – they are versions of types that would be familiar to readers of *Drum*. In fact, their pleasure in the story would derive in part from their ability to decode these references, which function almost as a kind of shorthand. When the narrator sees the *tsotsi* lounging against the waiting-room wall at Phomolong, he comments, wryly: "I knew the type, so I watched him in grim

anticipation” (35). When the *tsotsi* starts to tease the girl, the narrator comments, “All township love-making is rough” (35). Themba’s readers would have been able to decode the “gibberish exchange” between the *tsotsi* and his friends on the platform at Mzimhlope (36). They would also have been able to supply the anatomical swear word (omitted in the story) which the *tsotsi* hurls at the woman who rebukes him – and which finally prompts the “hulk of a man” to intervene (38). They would clearly have had the cultural competence (if not always the “literary competence”) to engage with and interpret the story.³⁷

Nkosi describes the kind of code which one was expected to uphold as “a *Drum* man”: one had to appear “urbane, ironic, morally tough and detached” (*Home and Exile* 9), and Themba is supposed to have exemplified this. “Kwashiorkor” is one of Themba’s most interesting (if most critically neglected) stories: it reveals his capacity to separate himself from his mask or persona and ask searching questions about the ethical responsibilities of the journalist. In the story *Dave*, the narrator, is a journalist who works for *The Courier*; he accompanies his sister, Eileen, a social worker, when she visits Alexandra. The story opens with his sister’s words as she flips through her file, “Here’s another interesting case” (*The Will to Die* 14). The story juxtaposes her clinical, detached approach as a social scientist with Dave’s more empathetic approach as a journalist on the lookout for a “human interest story” (14). She “probes into the derelict lives of the unfortunate poor in Johannesburg,” studies their “living habits, their recreational habits, their sporting habits, their drinking habits, the incidence of crime, neglect, malnutrition, divorce, aberration” and records all this on cyclostyled forms that “ask their questions ready-made” (14). She is “so clinical that no particular case rattles her” – or so we are told (14). Dave, on the other hand, apparently finds it difficult to remain “objective” and allows his “sentimental reactions” to get in the way (14).

Dave and his sister go to Alexandra to investigate “another interesting case” (14). The narrator summarises the facts relating to the Mabiletsa family: the grandmother is left caring for a child (who suffers from kwashiorkor) while the unmarried teenage mother works as a domestic servant. Eileen’s report offers the following thumb-nail sketch of the mother: “Maria: good-time girl, seldom at home,

³⁷ The idea of “literary competence” is developed in Culler in *Structuralist Poetics* (113-130). Many of *Drum*’s readers would, of course, have been uninterested in the question of whether “The Dube Train” should be read as a short story or a literal eye-witness account.

spends earnings mostly on self and parties.” Themba’s story takes us behind these surface “facts” to reveal the human situation, and the young mother begins to assume flesh and blood form. After giving birth she goes back to work, visits the home less and less often, and then not at all. “A typical case of recidivism,” according to Eileen.

On their next visit to the grandmother, we are view the gloomy interior of her house, we register the details of the grandmother’s infirmity and weariness, and finally we are confronted by the child who is “wasting away”. The distended belly, the blotched skin, the rusty hair, are all symptoms of the deficiency disease that is robbing her of her life.

The child looked aside towards me, and the silent reproach, the quiet, listless, abject despair flowed from the large eyes wave upon wave. Not a peep. Not a murmur. The child made no sign of complaint except the struggling breathing. (21)

This is uncannily reminiscent of the moment in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* where Marlow enters to a grove of trees and discovers that it is full of “black shapes” lying there “in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment and despair” (66). His eyes meet those of one of the workers who have been allowed to crawl there and rest, and he can find nothing else to do but offer him one of his ship’s biscuits. This story represents an analogous journey into a heart of darkness: here, in a city founded on gold, the powerhouse of the modern industrial economy of South Africa, we find, alongside the wealth and luxury, poverty, abandonment and despair.

“What . . . could this little monkey know? And, yet, there it all was in those tragic eyes.

Then I thought, “*So this is kwashiorkor!*” (21)

This is the central moral discovery of the story. Hitherto the word “kwashiorkor” had been “just another scare-word” for Dave, “another disgusting digit, a clipped statistic that health officials hurled at us reporters, and which we laced our copy with to impress sensation-seeking editors who would fulminate under headlines like **KWASHIORKOR AT YOUR DOOR**” (21). Dave is forced to confront the reality behind the word:

But here in this groanless, gloomy room, it seemed indecent to shriek banner headlines when the child itself is quiet. It spoke no protest, it offered no resistance. (22)

Nevertheless, life must go on, and a reporter's life is so "full and hectic" that "no single experience, however profound, can stay . . . for long" (22). Dave's memory is jogged by a chance encounter with the mother in a courtroom (she is charged with receiving stolen goods). Dave and his sister visit Alexandra, only to find that the grandmother and child have returned to "the reserve" in Pietersburg (24). Faced with debt and starvation, she had no other option.

We discover that, in spite of herself, Eileen has let this case get under her defences. She explains that the child is doomed in the rural area, and when her brother reminds her that it is just another case, she spits back at him: "I only wanted to save that one child, damn you!" (25). Her assumed objectivity, her clinical attitude, are unable to protect her.

There is one more surprise encounter, with the mother, Maria, whom Dave meets at a party in Dube, "one of those class affairs where thugs and tarts appear in formal dress" (25). When he reminds her of their earlier meeting, she absolves herself of any blame for the child's death, claiming that it had been bewitched.

The story asks, implicitly, who or what is to blame for this child's death. Where does the social worker's (or the journalist's) responsibility begin and end? Can one blame the mother? Does one transfer the blame to "society"? Should everyone assume some responsibility? How does one live with the knowledge that innocent children suffer and die avoidable deaths? The irresistible inference is that behind the façade of the hard-bitten journalist and devil-may-care man-about-town, Can Themba, there was an acutely sensitive, suffering, morally aware human being.

Themba's work from the late 1950s and early 1960s shows a turn towards interiority and personal reflection – a style of writing associated in particular with the essay and the autobiography, or life writing. Several of these pieces existed only in typescript at the time of his death, and were published in *The Will to Die* in 1972 – among them "Kwashiorkor". This period in Themba's life coincides with the destruction of Sophiatown and Themba's own decline into alcoholism. Van Dyk notes that by 1956 (the year in which "Marta" was published in *Drum*), Themba "was already an excessive drinker, attracted inexorably to self-destruction by the frustrations that he describes in his contemplative pieces, 'Crepuscule', 'The Will to Die', 'Requiem for Sophiatown', and 'The Bottom of the Bottle'" (82). As a direct

result of what Themba referred to as “[his] bottle blindness in Sophiatown” he was fired from his position of assistant editor of *Drum* by Tom Hopkinson. These writings of Themba’s return us to the terrain explored by Modisane in his autobiography, *Blame me on History*, and his short story, “The Situation”. There is in fact a striking convergence between his and Themba’s perceptions of their own, alienated situations, and their own relative helplessness before the intrusions of the apartheid state.

“Crepuscule”, first published posthumously in *The Will to Die* (1972) is largely based on Themba’s own experience of an affair with a white Englishwoman whose enforced departure from South Africa left him devastated.³⁸ Nkosi comments in his “Obituary”: “At that time I had a glimpse into someone’s suffering, and I don’t care to see it again. Nadine Gordimer’s novel, *Occasion for Loving*, may or may not have been based on that period in Can Themba’s life, but it offers a striking parallel” (*The Will to Die* ix). “Crepuscule” reflects on the invasion of one’s personal life by the prohibitions against inter-racial liaisons or marriage, and comments on the kind of pathologies that this induces in both black and white South Africans. The title suggests a liminal, in-between situation, and in this piece (part autobiographical fragment, part discursive essay) Themba examines the “bitter sense of loss” of those who find themselves between cultures, “caught in the characterless world of belonging nowhere” (*The Will to Die* 8). Themba speaks directly and personally, without irony or indirection, of the “the whiteman’s crime against [his] personality” (9). His estrangement from his own “tribal” culture leaves him exposed and vulnerable, striving in vain for acceptance in “this whiteman’s world where everything significant is forbidden” (8). He finds himself wandering like a spectre in a “crepuscular shadow-life” (8). This resembles Modisane’s account of his predicament in *Blame me on History* (“I am the eternal alien between two worlds” (218)). It recalls also Nkosi’s reaction to the label “Non-White”: “In that small prefix . . . I saw the entire burden and consequence of European colonialism” (*Home and Exile* 32). These writers are reacting to a common predicament, summed up memorably by Themba in the most painfully honest of his autobiographical pieces, “The Bottom of the Bottle”:

We were those sensitive might-have-beens who had knocked on the door of white civilisation (at the highest levels that South Africa could

³⁸ Her name was Jean Hart, and her comments on her relationship with Themba are recorded in Nicol’s *A Good-Looking Corpse* (180-82).

offer) and had heard a gruff ‘No’ or a “Yes” so shaky and insincere that we withdrew our snail horns at once.

(*The World of Can Themba* 229)³⁹

“How revealing is that parenthesis,” writes Rabkin. “When the white government stepped in to slam the door firmly in the face of the black man who claimed a part in ‘white civilisation’, the black intelligentsia (certainly the part of it to which the *Drum* group belonged) collapsed” (122).

In “The Bottom of the Bottle” Themba in effect writes his own obituary, as he attempts to account to his own conscience for the waste of his talent (and that of the young men who followed him). We were, he says, “cavaliers of the evanescent, romantics who turned the revolt inwards upon our own bruised spirits. It was flight now, no more just self-erasure” (230). Nkosi’s description of Themba as “the romantic nihilist of the house” seems particularly apt (*Home and Exile* 9).

The dramatic focus of this fragment is the encounter between Themba and two ANC politicians who pay him a late-night visit at the “House of Truth”. The ANC, they argue, is not just a political party, it is “the organisation of every Ahfrican, every Ahfrican” (231). Themba responds, “How do you know what I think?” (231). For his visitors, the answer is simple: “You’re black, are you not? You’re an African, are you not? So long as you’re black we know what you suffer and what you think” (231).

A great deal is at stake here. Their appeal for solidarity is based on Themba’s blackness – the racialised oppression of apartheid applies equally to all blacks. In this respect, these writers anticipate the appeal of Black Consciousness. This is a step which Themba is, however, unwilling or unable to take: he sees himself as an individual with his own perceptions, feelings and affiliations. In terms of contemporary Western culture these expectations are of course entirely unremarkable. Themba’s response suggests the extent to which he and his fellow writers had assimilated the liberal ethos disseminated in part through institutions such as Lovedale and St. Peter’s, and in part through the literature which they devoured with such intensity. The values which Themba asserts are the standard liberal ideals of individuality, freedom of thought and association and respect for human dignity. As Nixon observes, “the Sophia group inherited from their mission-school education a sweet tooth for the culture and values of white liberalism” (23). Themba is claiming

³⁹ Like “Crepuscule”, “The Bottom of the Bottle” was first published in *The Will to Die*. The typescripts of both pieces were in the possession of Themba’s widow, Anne.

for himself the rights of a modern subject. He cannot turn back to and embrace a traditional African identity – and he cannot accept the embrace of the ANC. His sense of himself (as a writer, an intellectual, an individual) would be compromised by commitment to a collective cause. We can understand why “the rest of African society” should look on him (and others like him) as (to use his own expression) “an excrescence (*The World of Can Themba* 228). Themba ends by acknowledging his own impotence – a victim of what one might call historical circumstances:

As I brood over these things, I with my insouciant attitude to matters of weight, I feel a sickly despair which the most potent bottle of brandy cannot wash away. What can I do?

(*The World of Can Themba* 236)

It was his fate (or his distinction?) to be conscious of his own tragedy.⁴⁰

“Requiem for Sophiatown” is a valedictory piece, and reveals the extent of Themba’s commitment to a particular, place – Sophiatown. As he walks among the ruins and recalls the Sophiatown that was, he feels “a nausea of despair” rise up in him (*The World of Can Themba* 238). He remembers the “veritable institutions” (the shebeens) he frequented and recalls memorable occasions, such as when “the great Dolly Rathebe once sang the blues to [him]” (239). “These were,” he says, “only highlights from the swarming, cacophonous, strutting, brawling, vibrating life of the Sophiatown that was” (239). Its destruction removed the only milieu in which someone like Themba could flourish.

What view can one take of Themba’s achievement as a writer?

For all his talent, though, Nkosi finds that “in scrutinising his writings . . . one is largely disappointed. . . . He chose to confine his brilliance to journalism of an insubstantial kind” (x). Mphahlele’s verdict was, as we have seen, similarly dismissive (“Black and White” 343). This discussion of his work contests these rather reductive readings (often based simply on his *Drum* stories), and points to the range variety and interest of his work. He was one of the most articulate representatives of a particular cultural “moment” (the brief flowering of the cosmopolitan culture of Sophiatown) and his work – in all its unevenness and contradiction – captures the tragic predicament of his generation of black intellectuals. Chapman reminds us that

⁴⁰ In “The Will to Die” he traces the decline and eventual suicide of a teacher called “Philip Matauoane”, clearly a thinly-fictionalised surrogate self (*The Will to Die* 62-66). It would not be an exaggeration to say that Themba drank himself to death in exile in Swaziland.

“a full response to the *Drum* stories includes a recognition not only of the ‘candy floss of vulgarity’, but also of the underlying, barely concealed abyss” (*The Drum Decade* 210). This is nowhere more evident than in the life and work of Can Themba.

ES’KIA MPHAHLELE

Mphahlele is the doyen of black writers in South Africa. His distinguished career – as writer, cultural activist, critic and academic – spans the second half of the twentieth century, and includes the experience of exile and return (controversially, in 1977). His autobiography, *Down Second Avenue* (1959) is one of the most widely read texts by a black South African writer. He is revered by the subsequent generations of black writers in this country; perhaps more than anyone else, he has helped to put black South African writing on the map. This section focuses on the first phase of his writing career, when he was finding his feet and his direction as a writer. It looks in particular on the sequence of stories published in *Drum* during the time that Mphahlele was fiction editor, before his departure from South Africa in 1957. Remarkably, until Chapman’s anthology, *The Drum Decade* (1989), only the first story in this sequence, “Down the Quiet Street” (January 1956) had been republished – in spite of Mphahlele’s own view that he was “doing something quite new” in these stories, and that he would like to “resuscitate” them (Mphahlele, “Interview” 106). I hope to show that these stories in fact represent some of the most interesting and innovative writing that Mphahlele published prior to his departure from South Africa, and that they need to be given due recognition in any estimation of Mphahlele’s fictional achievement.⁴¹ Perhaps the only critic to adequately register their significance is Bruno van Dyk. In his unpublished M.A. thesis on the *Drum* short stories, he points to the “scant critical attention” these stories have received, and describes “Down the Quiet Street” as “a watershed in [Mphahlele’s] literary career” and “a fresh departure in his fiction” (98). He also points out that many of the generalizations commonly made about *Drum* writing do not readily

⁴¹ Chapman does acknowledge that “Down the Quiet Street” (the first of the Newclare stories) “initiated a new departure” for Mphahlele, and that in the stories that follow his “abiding concern—the capacity of ordinary people to survive—begins to make itself felt,” but he doesn’t develop this in any detail (*Drum* and its Significance” 215). In her earlier study of Mphahlele’s writings, Ursula Barnett’s discussion does not go much beyond paraphrase (42-47). Lewis Nkosi regards these stories as “little more than sketches” (133). Maughan-Brown refers rather dismissively to these stories in this discussion of Chapman’s anthology – but nevertheless suggests that Mphahlele’s focus on the “ordinary” may have enabled his readers to recognize themselves and their milieu and gain a sense of worth” (5-6). Obee’s discussion of the stories is marked by an at times over-simple insistence on their “African humanist” elements, or by claims that the concerns expressed in the stories in some way anticipate Black Consciousness (47-55).

apply to these stories: they do not fall into the “sentimental” or “escapist” categories, nor do seem to be examples of “protest fiction”.

In order to appreciate the significance of the “Lesane” stories in terms of Mphahlele's development as a writer, one needs to look briefly his earlier work. His first collection of stories, *Man Must Live and Other Stories*, was published in Cape Town by the African Bookman in 1946. It consisted of five stories, of which only one, the title story, has been subsequently reprinted. The stories were written while Mphahlele was in his early twenties, working at the Ezenzeleni Institute for the Blind in Roodepoort, and studying for his matric. He tells us that “[he] had never studied the short story form: [he] was just writing as [his] feelings dictated” (*Down Second Avenue* 164). Mphahlele was seemingly rather embarrassed by these stories in later life: “They're so clumsy and laboured and the idiom so heavy . . . I'm amused by the way I looked at life then” (Interview with Tim Couzens; quoted by Hodge 49). The most effective of the stories is probably the title story, “Man Must Live” (reprinted in *The Unbroken Song*, 54-69). When we are introduced to Khalima Zungu, he is working as a railway policeman. He defers to (white) authority, serves his masters loyally and faithfully, and prides himself on his strength. However, he isolates himself from the other workers whom he views as “cattle” or “sheep”. His own maxim, “Man must live,” with its implied self-justification, amounts, as Hodge points out, to “a denial or repudiation of humanity” (*Unbroken Song* 50). When he does finally marry, it is to a woman who simply uses him for her own ends and eventually discards him. The reader is left contemplating the pitiful shell of the once confident and masterful man. In general, however, the reliance on authorial commentary tends to muffle the story's impact.

The early story which perhaps most clearly demonstrates Mphahlele's increasingly sophisticated grasp of the short story form is “The Suitcase”, first published in *Drum* in February 1955, but much anthologised.⁴² It dramatizes an episode in the life of its protagonist, and in terms of form and design approximates the norms of the “well-made” short story, complete with a “twist” at the end. It is the result of the reworking of what Mphahlele tells us was “in essence a true story,” told to him by his wife (*Down Second Avenue* 217). Mphahlele's first story to be published in *Drum*, “Blind Alley” (September 1953, repr. in *The Unbroken Song* 4-

14), is perhaps more indicative of the way his work was to develop. The opening paragraph marks his discovery of his subject matter:

So the tragic song of Moroka goes. Squalid sack shanties calling. Squalid narrow streets repelling and calling Some lose their hates, loves; others stick out their jaw and live above the flat shanties, the dirty streets swarming with flies. Many revolt against these things, against their wives; their husbands, their parents. But Moroka continues to sprawl up the hill, made by the people, making the people in it. (*Unbroken Song* 4)

This emphasis on the squalor, the dirty streets, the teeming, on-going life is characteristic of the “Lesane” stories. The central situation is sketched briefly (in marked contrast to the lengthy exposition of “Man Must Live”). The story is episodic, consisting of a series of brief vignettes, with fairly abrupt transitions. Extensive use is made of dialogue, which is terse, and appropriately phrased. The action of the story culminates in confrontation and violence, when shack-dwellers who are marching to demand better houses are charged by the police. In the *melée* Ditsi, the protagonist, kills a policeman. Juxtaposed with this is a love-triangle: Ditsi's wife Thamila leaves him for his best friend, John Seeku. Rather improbably, Ditsi encounters the two of them on a railway platform. The story is somewhat melodramatic, but in comparison with the *Man Must Live* collection there are considerable gains in terms of vividness and immediacy of presentation. The representation of communal violence in “Blind Alley” is, however, somewhat stark – a case, perhaps, of a writer exploiting what Nkosi called “the ready-made plots of racial violence [and] social apartheid” (*Home and Exile* 132).

If Mphahlele's focus was always (as he subsequently claimed) “the drama of life as lived in the ghetto” (*Afrika My Music* 14-15), then “Blind Alley” marks his first step in this direction. It was published three years before he started working for *Drum* as a journalist – hence one must view with some scepticism the claim that it was his experience as a *Drum* reporter which “broke down the laboured ‘English Literature’ idiom” (Hodge 62). His fiction was developing in this direction anyway; what *Drum* gave him was the stimulus to write and an outlet for the publication of his work.

⁴² It appears, for example, in *The Unbroken Song* and most recently in the Penguin Modern Classics edition of *In Corner B* (2006).

The first story in the “Lesane” sequence, “Down the Quiet Street”, was published in *Drum* under the pseudonym, “Bruno Esekie”. The opening paragraph introduces us to Newclare:

Nadia Street was reputed to be the quietest street in Newclare. Not that it is any different from other streets. It has its own dirty water, its own flies; its own horse manure; its own pot-bellied children with traces of urine down the legs. The hawker's trolley still slogs along in Nadia Street, and the cloppity-clop from the hoofs of the over-fed mare is still part of the street.

(95)

The story announces its concern with the “ordinary” rather than the “spectacular” or the sensational.⁴³ Nadia Street is no different from any other street in Newclare. There is surely a deliberate gesture in choosing Newclare as the location for these stories. Unlike its more celebrated neighbour, Sophiatown, Newclare has not been written up in the literature, and has not acquired the aura of romance or glamour which surrounds Sophiatown. Mphahlele was critical of the kind of fiction that *Drum* sought to publish, with “its use of Sophiatown as the yardstick of what the South African non-white should read” (*Down Second Avenue* 187-88). These stories are deliberately located in the more ordinary setting of Newclare.⁴⁴

One is struck by the gritty, uncompromising realism of this opening description. The particular sights, sounds, and smells of Nadia Street are registered precisely and vividly – down to the traces of urine on the legs of the children. The narrator's insistence that the hawker's trolley “still slogs along” in Nadia Street, that the “clippity clop” of the hoofs is “still part of the street” underscores the real-life, potentially verifiable existence of Nadia Street. The writer is documenting a reality that insists on being heard, seen and recorded. Nadia Street in its particularity is metonymic of the realities of the apartheid ghetto. Mphahlele himself grew up in Marabastad, and the sights and sounds of Second Avenue were etched into his memory and inform his subsequent representations of township life, whether fictional or non-fictional. Both *Down Second Avenue* and the “Lesane” stories offer

⁴³ Ndebele uses the “ordinary” as a descriptive and evaluative term in opposition to the “spectacular” – a style of writing which he says has outlived its usefulness (*Rediscovery of the Ordinary* 37-57). Ndebele writes from the perspective of the 1980s, by which time the convention of the “spectacular” had, he argues, outlived its usefulness.

an insider's view of township life, based on firsthand observation and experience. Mphahlele's various comments on "the tyranny of place"⁴⁵ in his critical writing are testimony to the formative influence of his own experience of growing up in Marabastad.⁴⁶

The narrative captures the way in which the residents of Nadia Street respond to the events which unfold around them:

Old Lebona down the street laughed and laughed until people feared that his chronic bronchitis was going to seize him by the throat and kill him. "Look at it down the street or up the street," he said, "it's the same. People will always do the unexpected. Is it any wonder God's curse remains on the black man?" Then he laughed again.

"You'll see," said Dikeledi, rubbing her breast with her forearm to ease the itching caused by the milk. She always said that, to arouse her listeners' curiosity. But she hardly ever showed them what they would see. (94)

This suggests the mixture of resignation, fatalism or wry humour with which the residents of Nadia Street assimilate the unexpected. It also reveals the way in which the exchange of views and information provides a kind of support or consolation. One becomes aware of the operation of a communal consensus in terms of which events are placed and understood. The underlying logic (implied by Dikeledi's "You'll see") is that there is an explanation for even the most unexpected events.

The story itself hinges on the discovery that the ordinary, everyday surface of life on Nadia Street can be deceptive. Funeral processions of various kinds make their way along Nadia Street to Croesus Cemetery. One such funeral party is described – from the vantage point of Constable Tefo, standing on the stoep of Sung Li's shop. At

⁴⁴ Newclare was in fact notorious in the 1950s as being the base of "the most violent and predatory Russian gang of them all" (Bonner 4). Together with Sophiatown and Martindale, it comprised the "Western Areas", and its residents were also threatened with removal.

⁴⁵ See for example "The Tyranny of Place and Aesthetics: The South African Case" (1981).

⁴⁶ Thuynsma has remarked that "personal experience, whether fictionalised or not, forms [Mphahlele's] creative impulse" (221). The details in the description of Nadia Street recur in *Down Second Avenue*: "There are many more second avenues with dirty water and flies and children with traces of urine running down the legs and chickens pecking at children's stools" (158-59). Remarkably, the same details appear in the piece which Mphahlele contributed to *Momentum* some seventeen years later, this time in relation to the Roodepoort township where he stayed. This indicates the typicality of Nadia Street, and also suggests that in his fiction Mphahlele is often drawing quite directly on his life experience, and his memories of Marabastad in particular. The first half of *Down Second Avenue* was written in 1957 before Mphahlele left South Africa - during or shortly after the period when he was working on the "Lesane" stories. It is not surprising that there should have been some cross-fertilization. According to Mphahlele (in an interview with Lindfors), in his short stories he relied for the main dramatic incidents on items from newspapers and on anecdotes which had been recounted to him: "Literally not a single event in my

the crucial moment, as the coffin is loaded onto the trolley cart, the wood splits, disgorging an avalanche of bottles. People swoop on the bottles and carry them away; the dumbfounded Tefo fails to make an arrest. The earlier prediction that one day “those coffins will tell their story” (97) is borne out, and Dikeledi's prophetic “You'll see” is confirmed when (after the arrival of her sixth child!) the widow Manyeu marries Constable Tefo: “Nadia Street gasped. But then it recovered quickly from the surprise, considering the reputation it had of being the quietest street in Newclare” (99).

The extraordinary has been assimilated, life goes on, and Nadia Street is able to maintain its possibly undeserved reputation. Implicit in the story is the recognition that in apartheid South Africa it is prohibition which criminalizes what would otherwise be a perfectly “ordinary” activity—the retailing and consumption of liquor. The “hero” of the story, in so far as there is one, is not (contrary to Barnett's suggestion (43)) Constable Tefo, but Nadia Street itself. The narrative is filtered through the consciousness of its inhabitants. The ambivalent figure of Tefo, who “looked [to his bosses] too human to be a good protector of the law” (95) becomes the subject of Nadia Street gossip and is finally assimilated through marriage to Manyeu.

Although the Lesane family do not feature, “Down the Quiet Street” with its communal focus does anticipate the stories that follow:

Since Diketso's eldest brother had announced to his father that he wanted to get married, the news had shot up and down Nadia Street like electric current. Along the rows of dilapidated houses that stood cheek-by-jowl as if to support one another in the event of disaster. It had no fences to jump because there are no fences in Newclare. The flies hovering over the dirty water in the street seemed to buzz it around without being involved in the joy of it. The news had percolated through wooden and cardboard paper windows, lashed about from tongue to tongue in the greasy, sticky darkness of Newclare rooms. It took a turn up and then down the next cross-streets, and then got out of hand so that it banged insistently on the eardrums of Lesane's enemies and drove them frantic with envy. Diketso's brother was going to get married.
(“Lesane I” 133)⁴⁷

short stories is my own invention” (170).

⁴⁷ For the sake of convenience, I will number the Lesane stories.

The news seems to take on a life of its own as it passes from house to house. The poverty and squalor are there, an unglamorous reality, but inseparable from the vitality generated by lives lived in such close proximity to each other. The ethos of this society is encapsulated by the advice given to the groom by one of his aunts: “Remember, a man is a man because of other men” (134) – a piece of proverbial wisdom which suggests Mphahlele’s underlying humanism. In discussion with Manganyi he talks about the “sense of cohesion” and “sense of togetherness” which were to be found in a “homogeneous location” like Marabastad, and he links this to the compassion that helps bind people together (“Looking In” 9).

The highlight of the first story is the wedding of the Lesane's eldest son – an occasion for communal participation and celebration – and the blend of traditional and Western customs provokes comment among the onlookers. As in “Down the Quiet Street”, events are mediated through communal gossip and speculation. This gives the stories their rich texture and conveys the feel of communal life. One instance is the scene in “Lesane I” where Ma-Mafate and Ma-Ntoi discuss the wedding as they bend over their washtubs. In the next story we see the two women discussing Fanyan's arrest (for possession of dagga) and subsequent release.⁴⁸ The overall success of the stories depends quite largely on Mphahlele's ability to convey something of the idiom and flavour of township talk through the medium of English.

The consistent foregrounding of the communal aspects of people's lives in these stories is linked to their subject matter: they deal with ordinary hopes and fears and with recurring human situations – with what Ndebele refers to as “the essential drama in the lives of ordinary people” (*Rediscovery of the Ordinary* 154). The Lesanes’ daughter, Diketso, wants to be something more than just a “factory girl” (160), and continues to meet with her lover in spite of her father's threats. Their son Fanyan, who was brought up in the country, is backward at school, afraid of the police, unfamiliar with the ways of the city, and lands up in jail for not carrying his pass. In the rather painful process of his adjustment to the city we can trace the familiar pattern of the “Jim-comes-to-Joburg” story. The mother, Ma-Lesane, struggles to bring up her children decently in the face of poverty and hardship. Lesane, her husband, complains about his kidneys and his sore feet and the failure to the government to give him his “sick pension” (138). His attempts or threats to beat Diketso or Fanyan into submission only reveal his own impotence. In

discussing his interest in the lives of ordinary people, Mphahlele comments: “Always I am drawn back to the people, the labourers, the non-professional people, where I see more vitality, where people still live, still feel life at its basic roots” (Manganyi, “Looking In” 10). This interest obviously derives from Mphahlele’s own upbringing in Marabastad, and in particular from his appreciation of the part played in his own life by his grandmother, his Aunt Dora, and his mother, whose efforts helped to hold the family together and whose sacrifices enabled him to get an education.⁴⁹

Two major events momentarily alter the course of everyday life in Nadia Street. The first is the wedding of Lesane’s son:

Outside there in the street the young folk were dancing.
Dancing as if yesterday they didn't have a riotous beer-spilling
raid; as if tomorrow they might not have a pass and tax raid.
For them today was just a chunk of sweetened and flavoured
Time. And in all this there was a spirit of permanence which
they felt, without thinking about it. (134)

The harshness and insecurity of their lives are mitigated by the life which they share and celebrate at moments such as this. Mphahlele remarks: "I have seen the survival, in the most urbanized ghettos of South Africa, of the toughest of traditional traits: the sense of community, the rituals surrounding birth, marriage and death, the theatre that surrounds life in general" (*The African Image* 71).

The second event is the apparently unprovoked attack on Ahmed Moosa, the Indian hawker. A trivial incident (a worm-eaten apple) triggers an extraordinary event where, half laughing and half in anger, a crowd gathers, turns on Moosa, pelts him with vegetables and fruit, and assaults him. He is rescued by Fanyan. The ugly episode is partly explained by the preceding account of the “black masses” pouring out of the trains “without heed of woman or weakling” (151). Their pressured and stressed lives, the frustration induced by poverty and oppression, all contribute to the seemingly gratuitous attack on the innocent hawker, who momentarily becomes a scapegoat. Ma-Lesane offers her children an explanation, couched in her own terms:

“This is how, my children: if you put your foot hard on a heap of
pebbles, you'll hear them grate and you'll feel them push one another

⁴⁸ There are similar scenes in *Down Second Avenue*. Chapter Four (“Water Tap”) is an obvious example.

⁴⁹ The scenes with the washerwomen doubtless owe something to the fact that his own grandmother and aunt took in white people’s washing. There are also some obvious points of comparison between Fanyan’s experience (as a newcomer to the city) and Mphahlele’s in *Down Second Avenue*.

outward. It's like that with us. There's something big on our shoulders, and so we stab and curse and beat one another.” (157)

The violence that shows itself in her own family (her husband's beatings of Diketso, his threats to chop Fanyan “to pieces”) is another manifestation of the burden of oppression that rests on the shoulders of the people of Newclare. Mphahlele's treatment of this incident is of a piece with his depiction of township life in these stories. The violent episode is carefully contextualised, and such explanation as we are given employs the language and idiom of one of the residents of Nadia Street itself.

One should emphasise that in these stories black people are not presented as victims, but as people who cope with resilience and fortitude in the face of adversity. According to Sole, “a large amount of the black literature of the fifties seems in retrospect to be aimed at the black intelligentsia and white liberals, and intended to rouse white consciousness to the plight of those racially dominated” (“Class, Continuity and Change” 160).⁵⁰ These stories do not seem to be addressed to a either a real or imagined white audience, and do not appeal in an obvious or overt way for the redressing of grievances. Mphahlele himself states that the significance of *Drum* writing was that “it was the black man writing for the black man. Not addressing himself to the whites. Talking a language that would be understood by his own people” (Manganyi, “Looking In” 24). These stories are not examples of “protest writing” – if by this we mean “fiction with a predominant politicising or ‘conscientising’ function” (Cornwell 68, fn.4), or fiction which appeals to the consciences of an implicitly white audience. The stories can be seen as making some kind of implicit protest – although this might apply to the work of almost any black writer in South Africa. Rabkin suggests that all Mphahlele's writing is a protest of this sort, as “it draws upon what is unacceptable in the present” (164). He argues (convincingly) that when Mphahlele talks about “the ironic meeting between protest and acceptance” (*Down Second Avenue* 217), he does not imply “resignation in the face of oppression” but rather “an artistic readiness to confront and work out of the reality that surrounds the author” (164).

The “Lesane” stories clearly challenge prevailing stereotypes of *Drum* writing. *Drum* stories were supposedly written simply to entertain and to “indulge the lively imagination of the urban population” – and, clearly, many of them did (Ndebele,

⁵⁰ This claim tends to be made by those critics who try to make the writing of the 1950s fit some paradigm of “protest writing”.

Rediscovery of the Ordinary 145). Mphahlele was well aware of – and at the time thoroughly irked by – the kind of taste which *Drum* tried to cater for. In *Down Second Avenue* he complains about “*Drum's* arbitrary standard of what the urban African wants to read” (187). In 1960, writing in the *New Statesman*, he criticizes *Drum* for “promoting a tough superficial prose which it believes the majority of literate non-whites . . . want” (“Black and White” 48). When he refers to “about seven of my own short stories which I had the conceit to think were not vulgar escapist stuff” (*Down Second Avenue* 188) he must have the “Lesane” stories in mind (and his comment reveals his view of the run-of-the-mill *Drum* story). His intention was clearly to produce something of a different order.

There is an interesting tension between the captions (which accompany the stories in their original form) and the stories themselves. “Down the Quiet Street” was described as “a story about Newclare, township of comic cops and coffins without corpses” (*Drum* January 1956: 48). “Lesane I” was accompanied by the following caption: “You remember ‘Down the Quiet Street,’ the funny funny piece of comedy about life in Newclare Township and the impossible Lesane family? This story now continues in a rollicking series” (December 1956: 41). (The Lesane family were not in fact mentioned in “Down the Quiet Street”!) “Lesane IV” (March 1957) was billed as “another story about that crazy, mixed up Lesane family from Newclare” (45). The captions clearly cater for the taste of a readership supposedly avid for spice, humour, sensation and excitement. Was Mphahlele, as fiction editor, responsible for marketing his own stories in this way, one wonders? In any event, his project, as realized in the “Lesane” stories, has gone largely unnoticed and unrecognized (with the notable exception of Van Dyk, and, more recently, Obee).⁵¹

While Mphahlele can be regarded as “middle class in aspiration and profession” (Visser 51), he writes from within the oppressed community and from the perspective of the ordinary members of that community. By taking their daily lives and experience as his subject, he in fact largely satisfies the criteria employed by Njabulo Ndebele in his call for a “rediscovery of the ordinary”. Like the *Staffrider* stories which Ndebele discusses, Mphahlele's *Drum* stories “remind us that the ordinary day-to-day lives of people should be the direct focus of political interest because they constitute the very

⁵¹ Obee is perhaps over-eager to find evidence for Mphahlele's “African humanist ethos” in the Lesane stories (and in *Down Second Avenue*) (50). She does, however, recognize that in these stories “humour

content of the [political] struggle, for the struggle involves people, not abstractions” (156). By situating people's “ordinary day-to-day lives” at the centre of his fictional project, Mphahlele confers on them a dignity and value which apartheid sought to deny. Writing in 1980, and looking back to the writers of the fifties, Mphahlele had this to say:

The black writer was asserting his sense of permanence in an urban ghetto life where he was being told he was a mere migrant worker with no hope for security of tenure in his municipal boxhouse. The writers helped fashion a township culture and gave it literary expression. . . . (“Landmarks” 7)

These stories are not, then, obviously or overtly “political”. There is an absence of political rhetoric or sloganeering, and there is no direct address or appeal to the reader. The struggle, as represented here, is primarily a struggle to survive and create a life for oneself – but clearly, in the context of the 1950s, this had political implications. Particular characters may display a limited awareness of their situation. We have seen how Ma-Lesane naturalises the often inexplicable workings of a repressive state apparatus: “The government is a strange person, I don't know, Elisha . . .” (138). Her comment arises from her own life experience and is expressed in the terms available to her.

Cornwell has argued that, in the South African context, for a black writer put pen to paper was in itself a political act (“Evaluating Protest Fiction” 52). In writing these stories Mphahlele is affirming, not just his own existence as person and writer, but also the existence of the urban community whose dynamics and rituals he represents with such fidelity. By so doing he implicitly challenges the legitimacy of an ideology and a state apparatus which seeks to deny black South Africans permanency or security of tenure in the (supposedly “white”) urban areas of their country. It is his achievement to have captured something of the quality of this “fugitive existence” (and its resilience) in his “Lesane” stories. These stories anticipate – in terms of both technique and subject matter – some of Mphahlele’s most successful stories, written from exile in the late 50s and early 60s. “In Corner B” (to take one example), first published in *The Classic* (1964), and also the title story of the collection published in Nairobi in 1972, is clearly indebted to the methods which Mphahlele developed in the “Lesane” stories.

and hope serve as counterweights to balance pain and desolation, suggesting that there is more to life for blacks than the fate-driven presence of state apartheid and white oppression” (48).

In formal terms, the “Lesane” stories are a deliberate departure from the conventions of the European short story, with its focus on a single protagonist and/or a single incident or situation. (“The Suitcase” is, I have suggested, cast in this more conventional mould.) They are not conceived as separate, discrete stories; to be meaningful, they need to be read as a sequence. They in fact constitute an embryonic short story cycle. The dynamics of the Lesane family (and the choices facing Fanyan and Diketso in particular) provide much of the narrative interest, but there is no closure or resolution. Fanyan may join the “Russians”; Diketso may escape the attentions of the Reverend Katsande; she may continue to defy her father and meet her lover at Reno Square – we can only speculate. Whatever happens, though, life in Newclare will go on.

CONCLUSION

The discussion of the work of these four writers suggests the difficulty of arriving at a general estimate of what is commonly referred to as “*Drum* writing”. Themba is himself such a complex character, and his literary output is so diverse, that he resists encapsulation. According to Rabkin, he “typified urban culture” and was “a cult figure” (113); according to Themba himself he was an “excrescence” (“The Bottom of the Bottle” 228) who existed in a kind of limbo, caught in “the characterless world of belonging nowhere” (“Crepuscle” 8). Both he and Modisane exhibit the tensions and contradictions of “a repressed elite”,⁵² they can hardly be taken as representative of the situation and experience of ordinary, working-class residents of “Kofifi”. The *Drum* writers have been described as aspirant middle class, and they frequently demonstrate a kind of love-hate relationship with the ghetto in which they are trapped. However, they resist definition in terms of conventional class analysis. According to Mphahlele, ordinary people mixed with “the highly educated and literate people like the Can Thembas and the Bloke Modisanes and the Arthur Maimanes. There was no stratification and people mixed very well” (*Sophiatown Speaks* 55). Mattera, who grew up on the streets of Sophiatown, supplies a different perspective: “We were in the streets, and they were in the desks. And we used to call such people ‘situations’” (*Sophiatown Speaks* 13). When they left their desks and returned home, however, the *Drum* writers were pitched back into the ghetto. Modisane lived in a backyard shack

⁵² The phrase is attributed to Couzens, but I haven’t been able to locate it in his work.

(however much he may have transformed its interior) and clearly identifies himself with Sophiatown: “We did not live in it, we were Sophiatown” (9); “I am saturated with violence, a piece of the feverish intensity of Sophiatown” (55). Themba may have been in possession of a degree in English, he may have walked around with a copy of the collected works of Oscar Wilde under his arm, and he may have peppered his work with literary allusions, but he was deeply immersed in Sophiatown’s shebeen culture. “Sophiatown was Can’s life,” according to the Anthony Sampson. “He combined a taste for Euripides and Blake with a restless life of intrigue and action in the streets and backyards of Sophiatown” (*Drum* 67).⁵³ He is the urban sophisticate, steeped in an English literary culture, yet he plumbs the depths of township life, and writes a requiem for Sophiatown.⁵⁴ In “The Will to Die” he writes what is in effect his own story and traces the stages of his own moral and physical decline. His corrosive cynicism leads ultimately to a “sickly despair” as he contemplates his own helplessness and impotence (“The Bottom of the Bottle” 236).

At this distance, we can understand something of Themba’s and Modisane’s historical predicament: they were the last representatives of a mission-educated elite who had assimilated the values of Western culture and embraced modernity – only to discover that no matter how accomplished or talented they may have been, they would always be denied acceptance by the dominant culture. As Themba himself recognised, “We were the sensitive might-have-beens who had knocked on the door of white civilisation . . .” (“Bottom of the Bottle” 229). The *Drum* short stories seldom engage directly with the socio-political condition of the oppressed black working class. If there is protest, it is usually muted, implicit or indirect. “How, from the teetering liminality of their artistic aeries,” asks Nixon, “were they to engage with the social needs of the broadly impoverished urban population below?” (17). Theirs is clearly not a proletarian literature – although it is rooted in the lived experience of the township. The Sophiatown writers were also limited by their ignorance of or indifference to indigenous-language literary traditions, and by their relative lack of exposure to the oral tradition, or the history of rural resistance. Kunene in particular

⁵³ Such a writer, Nixon argues, “could never assume a purely abstract relation to the urban underclass” (20).

⁵⁴ Something of his complexity is captured by Harry Mashabele in his tribute to Can Themba: “Can was over-complex. A rebel. A man of the people. A kind of genius. A rascal. Sensible. Nonsensical. All crammed up in one man. And yet he remained something of a legend.” He adds: “As a man of the people, he lived at the very bottom of life, mixing with the lowly and doing precisely what he himself felt was the right thing to do” (“Can Remembered” 12).

criticizes their failure to place their writing “within the context of the long tradition of verbal art, both oral and written, especially that devoted to the struggle” (“Language, Literature and the Struggle for Liberation” 39). He suggests that some knowledge of this tradition might have “broken [their] self-imposed isolation and instilled a salutary sense of humility, if not of pride” (39).⁵⁵ These resources (orature, the history of resistance) were to be utilised by a later generation of black writers. The predicament of the Sophiatown writers found its answer in the new politics of identity elaborated by the next generation of black intellectuals: the aspiration to be accepted by the “white” world was replaced by its dialectical opposite, the affirmation of a “black” identity. This does not, however, detract from the significance of the *Drum* writers as spokespersons for their particular class or group; nor does it detract from the fact that they were able to place on the literary and cultural map the emergent urban culture of which Sophiatown was the exemplar. “Sophiatown set the pace, giving urban African culture its pulse, rhythm and style during the 1940s and 1950s. . . . A new synthesis of African culture sprang up here, shouting for recognition” (Coplan 144). It was in the pages of *Drum* that it found expression in print.

One must acknowledge (as Nixon does) that the impact of these writers on “the discursive possibilities” in South Africa was limited by their particular class position and by their blindness to their own (often unconscious?) sexism (40). This is reflected in the often stereotypical representations of black women (as shebeen queen, “good-time girl”, gangster’s moll or domesticated housewife), and in the demeaning terms often used to refer to women. As Chapman puts it, *Drum* was “aggressively, even callously, masculinist” (*Southern African Literatures* 239).⁵⁶ This is such an obvious feature of the magazine that it hardly requires detailed substantiation here. One should, however, draw attention to the absence of women writers and journalists:

⁵⁵ Again, it is difficult to generalize: Mphahlele clearly has an awareness of orature (and traditional storytelling in particular), as well as an appreciation of the “humanism” that he sees as part of traditional culture.

⁵⁶ Critics who reinforce or support this view include Nixon, who refers to *Drum*’s “relentless machismo” (20), Choonoo, who refers to *Drum* and *Golden City Post* as “overtly sexist” (258), Maughan-Brown, who describes Mphahlele’s tribute to Lilian Ngoyi (“Guts and Granite”) as “a monument to the sexism of the ‘new African’” (“The Anthology as Reliquary?” 11), and Gready, who lists some of the terms used by Motsisi to refer to women – ““‘girlos’, ‘cherries’, ‘sizzlers’, ‘sheilas’” (156). Driver discusses *Drum*’s promotion of “an ideology of domesticity”, and suggests that the magazine’s shift from rural “past” to urban “present” was negotiated “largely by means of belittling and damaging misrepresentations of women” (232). Much of what she says has direct application to Themba’s appropriation of the popular romance genre.

even the “Dear Dolly” correspondence column was written by what Sampson calls “a worried syndicate of men” (*Drum* 122). The three *Drum* stories supposedly written by women turn out to have been the work of Arthur Maimane. They were billed as “true love confessions”, and attributed to “Rita Sefora” (“I was in Dreamland”), “Joan Mokwena (“My Husband was a Flirt”) and Doris Sello (“I Broke their Hearts”), and published in the course of 1953.⁵⁷ There is ample evidence of the (often unconscious) androcentric assumptions that governed both the management and the content of the magazine. Nkosi, for example, simply assumes that *Drum* reporters were male, and that to be a “Drum man” one had to cultivate a particular personal style – “urbane, ironic, morally tough,” etc. (*Home and Exile* 9). He goes on to tell us that “a *Drum* man took sex and alcohol in his stride” (9). If one was a *Drum* woman, one might pose for a cover pin-up, but one would never, apparently, put pen to paper!⁵⁸

Mzamane and Matshoba inherit (and perpetuate) this masculinist culture. It is not until Tlali, Ndebele and Wicomb that we find black writers who question, resist, or subvert the implicit or explicit sexism that characterizes *Drum* – and as a popular magazine *Drum* was clearly reflecting attitudes and assumptions which were current in the culture of the township.

⁵⁷ Information about the authorship of these stories is contained in Driver’s article, “Drum Magazine and the Spatial Configurations of Gender” and is based on an interview she conducted with Maimane.

⁵⁸ One should perhaps note that Bessie Head worked as a reporter for the *Golden City Post* in Cape Town in 1958, before moving up to Johannesburg in 1959. She was their only woman reporter. In Cape Town her duties seem to have included typing out recipes and reporting on court cases (Eilersen 40); in Johannesburg she wrote a weekly column for teenagers, and got to know many of the *Drum* journalists (the two publications shared offices). She subsequently contributed articles to the *New African*, the monthly journal started by Randolph Vigne in 1962 (Eilersen 54).

CHAPTER 5: THE DISTRICT SIX WRITERS – THE “PROTEST SCHOOL”?¹

The *Drum* writers were of course not alone. While they may have monopolised both critical and popular attention, their counterparts in Cape Town were the District Six writers, named after the District which has entered popular mythology and folklore (much as Sophiatown has done). They in fact contributed stories to *Drum*, and Richard Rive forged personal links with some of the *Drum* writers (in particular, Mphahlele). The writers in question are Richard Rive, James Matthews, Alex la Guma and Peter Clark.² Apart from their links with District Six, and their interest in the short story, they also shared an ascribed identity as “coloured” (in terms of the Population Classification Act of 1950). The inclusion of their work raises issues which are central to this study. What difference does their status as “coloured” make to their sense of themselves and to the kind of writing they produce? In what sense can they be said to be “writing black” (the title of Rive’s autobiography)? To what extent does District Six provide the informing context for their work, and what is their relation to its hybridised culture? Finally, is their writing a species of “protest literature”? The works to be explored include *Quartet* (1963), an anthology compiled by Richard Rive, Rive’s own *African Songs* (1963), the short stories of James Matthews (*The Park and other Stories*, first published in 1974) and the short fiction of Alex la Guma.

COLOUR

The designation “coloured”³ is often seen as an instance of apartheid-era naming, and many people referred to as “coloured” would resist or reject this designation – for reasons which are entirely understandable. A central proposition of this study is that, whether one likes it or not, colour matters (or has mattered): it was the major determinant of identity in South Africa during the colonial and apartheid eras, and it continues to profoundly influence the ways in which people see themselves and relate to others in post-1994 South Africa. This does not of course mean that racial categories are not constructs – but they are (or were) experienced as very real determinants of identity: one’s racial classification in effect determined the “lifeworld” of every South African. Reddy argues that “the importance of racial and ethnic

¹ The phrase is Rive’s, used in *Writing Black* to describe himself and other writers of the 1950s (86).

² Strictly speaking, only Rive and la Guma came from District Six: Matthews grew up in an area adjacent to the Bo-Kaap, a short walking distance from the District, while Clark was born in Simonstown.

³ My use of the lower-case “c” signals a deliberate distancing from the capital “C” of apartheid’s official terminology. At times, depending on the context, I also use inverted commas as a reminder that this is a contested category.

identities in the interpretation of social and political behaviour in South Africa's history cannot be exaggerated. The fact that racial and ethnic identities are felt strongly and perceived six years into a new democratic dispensation invites one to reflect on the discursive power of these collective identities" (64). This is not the place for an in-depth discussion of the vexed question of "coloured identity", but in order to remove possible misconceptions – and to throw some light on the situation of the District Six writers – some basic points need to be made.

The existence of the "impure" coloured community was of course a major embarrassment to the architects of apartheid. In terms of their ideology, everyone had to belong to particular racial or ethnic group, and society was ordered on this basis. In the "coloured" group they found a community of disparate origins, rather than a homogenous group, one which longer spoke an indigenous (African) language, had no rural homeland (to which could theoretically be assigned), and which was further divided along religious lines (the salience of Islam in the Western Cape derives from its history of slavery). In apartheid terms, this non-group was a scandal. The only resort was to define it in negative terms: in the language of the Population Registration Act of 1950 a "coloured" person was "not a white or a native" (quoted in Reddy 74). A "native" was "a person who in fact is or is generally accepted as a member of any aboriginal race or tribe of Africa" (Reddy 74). Proclamation 46 of 1959 further subdivided the "Coloured" group into "Cape Coloured, Cape Malay, Griqua, Indian, Chinese, other Asiatic and other Coloured" (Omond 21) – in so doing simply underlining the heterogeneity of the "group" it was attempting to define and demarcate. These attempts at classification on the part of the state reveal the absence of obvious "positive" markers in terms of which this group can be defined (my own description, above, is couched almost entirely in negatives). As Farred puts it, colouredness was "overdetermined by negativity" (6). The Act of 1950 reveals the impossibility of using the term "coloured" as an "unambiguous, unproblematic reference to a real existing 'thing' with a real 'essence'" (Reddy 78). The group becomes in effect the repository for "the unclassifiable, the doubtful and the borderline" (Reddy 78). (It should, of course, be noted in passing that neither "blackness" nor "whiteness" refer to coherent identities which are simply unproblematically "given".) Colouredness has always been understood as "a residual, in-between or 'lesser' identity" (Erasmus 16) – this notwithstanding the fact that coloureds could in fact claim a uniquely South African identity, based on their experience of four centuries of colonial history: "[coloured identities] are cultural formations born of appropriation, dispossession and translation in the colonial encounter" (Erasmus 16). The end product of this process is a unique creolised identity, "completely grounded in South Africa" (Farred 7) – an identity

made in part through the agency and creative cultural intervention of those designated “coloured”. One word for this hybrid identity would be “creolised”, if by this we understand “cultural creativity under conditions of marginality” (Erasmus 16).

It follows that central to the process of coloured identity formation is its positioning between “white” and “black” in a racialised hierarchy – not quite white, but better than black. As a result, according to Erasmus, “respectability and shame are key defining terms of middle-class coloured experience. For me, growing up coloured meant knowing that I was *not only* not white, but *better than black*” (13). Those classified coloured found themselves situated ambiguously on a sliding scale somewhere between “white” and “black”; as a result they developed a hyper-sensitivity to such signifiers of racial identity as skin colour, hair type and facial and bodily features. Erasmus identifies the salient features of this ambiguous positioning:

At the same time, the shape of my nose and the texture of my hair placed me in the middle on the continuum of beauty as defined by both men and women in my community. I had neither sleek hair nor *boesman korrels*. The humiliation of being “less than white” made being “better than black” a very fragile position to occupy. The pressure to be respectable and to avoid shame created much anxiety. These were discomfiting positions for a young woman to occupy. (Erasmus 13)

These are, of course, among the issues explored in Zoë Wicomb’s collection of short stories, *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987), and we would expect the issues associated with coloured identity (whatever the stated position of the writers) to manifest themselves in the work of the District Six writers. Wicomb’s article, “The Case of the Coloured in South Africa”, points in particular to the importance of “shame” as a concept when looking at the “textual construction, ethnographic self-fashioning, and political behaviour of coloureds in South Africa” (92) This explains the temptation to “pass” for white, and the attempt, on the part of some of the more upwardly mobile members of this group, to distance themselves from “blackness” and identify with the hegemonic “white” culture. Frequently this meant denial of any association with slavery, and disowning or disavowing any “black” ancestry.

Is it in fact useful or necessary (particularly in the context of the “new” South Africa), to continue to use the term “coloured”? I feel uncomfortable with my own continued use of the term, hence the frequent resort to inverted commas. I do, however, accept the validity of the point made by Erasmus, Farred, Nuttall and others that coloured identities cannot be simply erased or wished away, or subsumed unproblematically in some larger “black” or national identity. These identities have not simply been imposed from without; they have also

been shaped by the creative agency of coloured people themselves, and are meaningful to many people. Erasmus argues that their subjective experiences need to be respected and valued (22). One can in fact identify a wide range of “coloured” cultural practices and traditions, and their regional variations. This ensemble of cultural forms and traditions (ranging, for example, from linguistic variations to religious observances to such everyday practices as cooking, hairstyling, music, recreation and dance) collectively constitute a heterogeneous identity shaped by conditions of exclusion and marginality. “Colouredness, understood here as the dynamic accumulation of this hybrid community’s unique experiences, history, culture, and traditions, cannot be erased, ignored . . . or incorporated unproblematically into ‘blackness’ or ‘whiteness’” (Farred 9). Arguably, citizenship in the “new” South Africa should not require people to deny or renounce their particular histories or identities. Erasmus identifies the project which resulted in her edited collection of essays (*Coloured by History, Shaped by Place* (2001)) as being to insist on “the possibility and multiplicity of ‘coloured places’” and to try to rethink “what it means to be coloured in post-apartheid South Africa” (14). It is perhaps relevant to note here James Matthews’s expressed concern for what he refers to as “the new marginals – the disaffected sections of the coloured community that he feels are searching for their identity” (“Still Raging After all these Years” 2).

The bearing of all this on the writers we are considering in this chapter will become obvious: however much they may have resisted their designation, they were classified differently and treated differently from other black, white or “Indian” South Africans. They also enjoyed certain privileges denied black South Africans.⁴ These writers regarded District Six as (in Matthews’s words) “[their] cultural oasis” (“Still Raging” 2) – a place with which they could identify, to which they belonged, or to which they felt some kind of allegiance.

DISTRICT SIX

District Six is of course the example par excellence of the creolised working-class culture that is central to the constitution of coloured identity. The history of the District is too well known to repeat in detail here, but one should perhaps make a few salient points. District Six takes its name from the Municipal Act of 1867 which divided Cape Town into six districts. It was also known unofficially as “Kanaladorp”, a name deriving either from its location to the east of a canal running from the Gardens to the Castle, or from the Malay term “kanala”, meaning “to

⁴ The most obvious of these privileges was the fact that they were exempt from carrying passes. In 1956 the Western Cape was declared a Coloured Labour Preference Area. Throughout the apartheid era determined efforts were made to keep blacks out of the Western Cape. Lewis states that “the urban Coloured worker, however poor, formed part of a privileged minority compared to the African migrant worker” (219).

do a favour”, or “please”, and suggesting mutual help.⁵ The District’s development during the nineteenth century was a result of the rapid growth of Cape Town, and of the abolition of slavery in 1834. By the turn of the century it housed a cosmopolitan, mainly working-class population, and was characterised by high-density housing, often in tenement buildings. The residents were overwhelmingly “small shopkeepers, artisans, and labourers, with a tiny sprinkling of professionals” (Bickford-Smith 37). Although most people in District Six were coloured, there were a number of black families resident in the District (Ngcelwane lists them by street in *Sala Kahle, District Six* (134-35). The District also provided a home for immigrants from Europe and the Eastern Cape. Most of its residents were dependent on seasonal or casual labour (on the docks or railways, in the fishing industry, or in the building trade, or in factories) and were “desperately poor . . . locked into what one can see as structural poverty, living in overcrowded tenements, subject to high mortality rates and the recipients of few relieving facilities” (Bickford-Smith 38). This situation was largely the result of neglect by the Cape Town City Council, who represented the interests of landlords and merchants. The smallpox epidemic of 1882 led to some attempt to improve sanitary conditions, and the bubonic plague of 1901 led to forced removal of African dock workers to Ndabeni. However, Bickford-Smith notes that in spite of widespread poverty, at the turn of the century District Six was “undoubtedly a vibrant place” (43). Part of this no doubt derived from the fact that it “teemed with pubs and canteens, with indoor games, gambling dens and brothels” (43). There was also evidence of political awakening: the District was the home of the African People’s Organisation (founded in 1902), whose leader, Dr Abdurahman, was a resident. It was also the location for John Tobin’s open-air Stone meetings.⁶ There were also early attempts to organise trade unions, such as the Cigarette Workers’ or Tramway Workers’ Unions (Bickford-Smith 42).

By the turn of the century the character of District Six had been established. The community that regarded District Six as home was a predominantly coloured, working class community characterised by strong neighbourhood links and a culture of sharing. As various writers have pointed out, the culture of the District was largely a street culture – hence its “vibrancy” (a favourite word). “It was in the streets that people socialised, exchanged their experiences and created their own form of expression” (Martin 133). According to Thuynsma,

It was in the streets that life became entertainment. Everything had potential, be it a swaying drunk or a sidewalk street fight. Newspaper vendors, bottle-

⁵ Information on the history of District Six is drawn primarily from Bickford Smith (35-43)

⁶ From 1901 regular meetings took place at a boulder at the top end of Caledon Street, where Tobin and other speakers provided “the first form of political education to coloured audiences” (Martin 92).

and-bone men, even an upended hawker's barrow became ludicrous spectacles. The rough culture was ripe with absorbing sights and characters
(Thuynsma 21)

The streets were also the preserve of the petty gangsters and "skollies". Their targets seem mostly to have been outsiders – a function of the fact that "people who grew up and lived in District Six knew everyone who belonged in the area. So did the gangsters, who grew up there and lived there. . . . They never bothered any of us living in District Six" (Fortune 58).⁷ The "skollie element" developed a subculture of their own, and exhibited some of the style and flair associated with the Johannesburg gangster or *tsotsi*.

They contrived violent and vulgar lifestyles to defy conformity and scratch out a sense of worth. . . . Stylish hats and caps clung to the sides of their heads as miraculously as their trousers were slung at mid-hip. . . . For them it was inconceivable to mount or dismount from a stationary bus, preferring instead the deadly craft of stepping from speeding busses, *backwards!*
(Thuynsma 21)

Not surprisingly, the "skollie" or *tsotsi* is a recurring figure of the fiction of both the *Drum* and the District Six writers: they demonstrated an urbanity and a defiance of authority that some found appealing.

It was of course through the streets of the District that the Malay Choirs and the Coons paraded at New Year, providing a spectacle for the whole community.⁸ The Carnival was the most obvious assertion of the presence and cultural vitality of the coloured community in Cape Town. As Martin notes, "'We are Cape Town' is a statement frequently heard and it resonates with pride" (177). At the same time, this ambivalent performance of a creolised identity attracted the criticism of left-wing intellectuals, particularly those affiliated to the NEUM,⁹ who saw in the Coons an enactment of roles that played into and reinforced white stereotypes of the "coloured".¹⁰

In terms of more formal entertainment, as was the case with Sophiatown, the cinema had an enormous impact on the culture of District Six.

⁷ Memoirs or life stories such as Linda Fortune's *The House in Tyne Street* or Hettie Adams and Hermione Suttner's *William Street, District Six* give a vivid sense of the texture of life in District Six.

⁸ American-style blackface minstrelsy was brought to the Cape in 1862 by the Christy's Minstrels, and through their interactions with local traditions the annual "Coon Carnival" was born – the most obvious and striking instance of Cape Town's creolized culture. Martin points out that most leaders and members of the coon troupes were unaware of the perjorative implications of the term "coon" – to them it simply signified "people playing carnival in a costumed band" (80). His book provides an in-depth study of the history of Cape Town's Coon Carnival.

⁹ The Non-European Unity Movement was formed in 1943 and was particularly influential among coloured intellectuals and teachers. It emphasized the tactics of boycott and non-collaboration,

¹⁰ Martin examines this issue in some depth (126-130).

The “bioscope” was much more than an ordinary cinema. It was a meeting place, where lovers had their secret *rendezvous*, where gangsters looking for prestigious role models energetically reserved certain rows in order to have a good view of the screen, where ushers who were involved in illegal trafficking could hide their merchandise in the cashier’s box and where decent people with a little money could afford to sit in the “soft seating” section. . . . The bioscope was something of an informal community centre, a place where order and disorder were confronted, a closed universe offering an escape from the dull realities of life and a bridge to the marvellous worlds of romance, wealth, prestige and, most of all, happy endings. (Martin 115)

As in Sophiatown, the cinema was the vector for conveying American popular culture. It was the origin of the “copycat” tradition, which saw local singers and performers emulating such figures as Al Jolson, Charlie Chaplin, Harry Lauder, Paul Robeson, Frank Sinatra and the singers and groups of the 1950s.¹¹

When considering the significance of District Six, and the devastating effect of its destruction, one has to be mindful of the temptation to romanticise or oversimplify. On the one hand, as Rive asserts, it was a slum: “None of us who grew up there will deny that. It was a ripe, raw and rotten slum. It was drab, dingy, squalid and overcrowded” (“District Six: Fact and Fiction”). He and others like him (the better educated, more upwardly mobile members of the community) often couldn’t wait to move out of District Six. Rive’s career as a writer, from his early stories to his later semi-fictional reconstruction in *Buckingham Palace, District Six* (1986), reveals his ambivalence about the District. On the other hand popular images of District Six – conveyed in part by newspaper reports and personal memoirs and reminiscences – suggest (in Nasson’s words) “a merry community, with a rich, vigorous and rowdy popular life” (48). The production which tapped into this popular mythology was Kramer and Petersen’s *District Six, the Musical*, which broke all box office records at Cape Town’s Baxter Theatre during its three-year run (from 1987 to 1990). District Six was represented as a community torn apart by the brutality of the apartheid regime. It provoked a lively debate among writers and intellectuals: Wicomb refers to attempts to construct District Six as “an ethnic homeland” (“The Case of the Coloured in South Africa” 94). On the other hand, Jaffer argues that the musical is more than just “a happy, carnivalesque nostalgic trip to an era long ago” (99). Rive accepts that the musical may be part of a “mythologizing process” (“Always Friday Night” 97), but states that “[it] comes at the right time, with the right measures of

¹¹ This tradition is captured in the Kramer and Petersen hit musical, *Kat and the Kings* (1998, with various revivals), which follows the fortunes of four young coloured musicians from District Six as they attempt to make their way to the top. The show was inspired by the story of one such group in the 1950s, the Cavella Kings, who sang covers of numbers popularized by groups like the Ink Spots and the Coasters. The show toured overseas, and played on Broadway and the West End.

nostalgia, humour, vivacity and political awareness. . . . It is one of the rare instances of a subjected group rediscovering its denied past” (98). This varied response helps to illustrate the reluctance on the part of many writers and intellectuals to acknowledge a distinct “coloured” identity.

To what extent does the literature that comes out of District Six reflect or challenge received views of life in the District? Do these writers provide one with a more nuanced or more complex picture of this community? Can one accept Rive’s claim that “only Alex la Guma and [himself] could be said to have the knowledge, experience and empathy which stems from intimate contact” (“District Six: Fact and Fiction” 113)?

RICHARD RIVE

Richard Rive was the most literary of the District Six writers. His role as literary entrepreneur and critic resembles that of Es’kia Mphahlele (the two were in fact life-long friends; Mphahlele wrote the introduction to Rive’s novel *Emergency* (1964) and was one of the speakers at Rive’s memorial service in 1989). Rive is perhaps the most elusive of the District Six writers. Behind the adoption of a rather flamboyant persona, marked by a pronounced Oxbridge manner and accent, was, one suspects, a private and somewhat insecure man whose relationship with his own family was troubled or distant; he was also never able to openly acknowledge his homosexuality.¹² This discussion will focus on early stories which established Rive’s reputation as a writer.

Beginning in January 1954, *Drum* published nine stories written by the District Six writers – four from Matthews, three from Peter Clarke, three from Richard Rive and one from Alex la Guma. (The numbers don’t add up because one of the stories, “Willie Boy”¹³ (April 1956) was in fact a combined effort.) The inclusion of these stories undoubtedly broadened the scope and range of the stories published by *Drum*, and suggested some kind of commonality between the District Six and the *Drum* writers. Both groups of writers were asserting a modern, urban identity, and they both resisted attempts to define them in ethnic or racial terms. Rive visited Johannesburg in 1955 (at the instigation of Barney Desai, the Cape Town editor of *Drum*’s sister paper, *The Golden City Post*) and met a number of the *Drum* writers, as well as Nadine Gordimer. In Rive’s autobiography, *Writing Black* (1981), he says that he “returned from Johannesburg inspired and seemingly worldly wise” (17). One has the sense of the world beginning to open out for the young, aspirant writer: the *Drum* writers had

¹² This only became generally known as a result of his murder in 1989 (by two young coloured men). The circumstances of his death are described in Sean Viljoen’s 2006 doctoral study, *Richard Rive: A Skewed Biography*, which is also the only study which attempts to look seriously at Rive’s closet homosexuality and the ways in which this may have manifested itself in his writing.

¹³ Willieboy was also the name of a character in La Guma’s *A Walk in the Night*, published a few years later.

shown the way, and Rive was eager to follow. It was only after this visit that Rive started to publish stories under his own name (Lee 59).

Rive had, however, already taken his first, tentative steps as a writer. At Barney Desai's request, he wrote a fictionalised mock-confession or cautionary tale entitled "My Sister was a Play White", using the pseudonym "Mary X".¹⁴ The story narrates the pain and division caused by the fair-skinned sister, Lucille, whose mother encourages her to "try for white". When she falls pregnant, and her (white) boyfriend discovers that she is in fact coloured, he abandons her. "Mary" writes the story as "a warning to all Coloured persons who entertain a desire to 'cross the line' and pass for White" (31). The story deals with what for Rive was a very real and sensitive issue – his dark skin colour. Rive was the child of a brief relationship between his mother (then aged thirty-eight, and a widow with seven children) and an African-American sailor called Richardson Moore (Rive's full name is Richard Moore Rive).¹⁵ That his father was never spoken of can perhaps be attributed to the mother's sense of shame and to "class prejudice overlaid as well, perhaps, by colour prejudice" (his siblings were apparently much fairer skinned) (Viljoen 56). In a revealing anecdote in *Writing Black* Rive refers to himself as "dark brown" (2). Drawing in part on the evidence of Rive's semi-autobiographical novel, *Emergency*, Viljoen concludes that "as a result of being the dark half-brother . . . , [Rive] felt the internalised racism that was prevalent in the family" (65). While this is somewhat speculative, sensitivity to gradations of colour is certainly a feature of Rive's writing (February lists the many colour-coded references in Rive's novel, *Emergency*).¹⁶ It is not coincidental that the situation of a family split along colour lines is the subject of Rive's first short story, and is also central to "Resurrection".

Rive's contact with the *Drum* writers was not the only important influence on his development as a writer. In 1955 Rive submitted a story called "Dagga-Smoker's Dream" to *New Age* (a Congress-aligned newspaper) which was running a short story competition. His story – written under the *nom de plume* "Richard Moore" – won first prize. More importantly, it brought him to the attention of the two judges, Jack Cope and Uys Krige, and this inaugurated what was to be a life-long association. Cope was an established writer, and was to become editor of South Africa's longest running literary journal, *Contrast*. (It was only founded in 1960, but the following comments seem relevant, in view of Rive's own long association with Cope and with *Contrast*.) *Contrast* was liberal in outlook, encouraged

¹⁴ The story was published in *Africa*, a sister publication of *Golden City Post*, in July 1955.

¹⁵ In *Writing Black* Rive claims not to know who his father is. In his dissertation Viljoen quotes from the letter to Langston Hughes in which Rive discloses information about his father – one of the many details that he suppresses in his autobiography (Viljoen 55-56). The letter to Hughes is dated 15 March 1962.

¹⁶ February gives a catalogue of what he calls "the real or perceived difference" that fill the pages of *Emergency* ("The stereotype and South African English Literature" 323-24).

submissions from writers on a non-racial basis (although in the early years black writers were few and far between), and applied quite rigorous “literary” standards to the work submitted to it. Rive’s debt to Cope as a literary mentor is obvious from comments in *Writing Black*, and from the fact that his *Selected Writings* (1977) is dedicated to Jack Cope, “who taught me how to write”. One of the things Cope did was make Rive “account for every word [he] wrote” (*Writing Black* 18) – a discipline and an approach to writing which most of his *Drum* contemporaries would not have been exposed to. At a comparatively early age (he was then 25), Rive had made contact with two groups of writers whose example and influence were to shape his own writing practice - the *Drum* writers, and the influential group of Cape writers whose members included Jack Cope, Uys Krige, Jan Rabie, Ingrid Jonker and Breyten Breytenbach. In addition, he had forged links with James Matthews (whom he met in the Cape Town office of Barney Desai) and he at least knew of Alex la Guma. The striking thing about these links, established early in his writing life, is that they cross the race, class and language barriers that have so often kept South African writers separate and isolated. Rive was in fact able to act as a kind of literary broker, and keep his finger on the pulse of developments in the fractured field of South African literature. He would have been assisted by his own principled non-racialism, and to his life-long refusal to toe a particular party line. As a result of his frequent travels abroad he was also able to act as a link with South African writers in exile. For all these reasons, Rive occupies an almost unique position in South African letters.

Rive was very resourceful when it came to finding publication outlets for his short stories. These range from *Fighting Talk* (the left-wing magazine founded by the Springbok Legion) to Jim Bailey’s *Drum* to *New Age* to *Contrast*.¹⁷ He was also able to make use of the international opportunities represented by journals such as *Presence Africaine*, *Transition* and the *Negro Digest*. His correspondence with Langston Hughes led to the inclusion of his short story “The Bench” in the anthology of African writing edited by Hughes, *An African Treasury* (1960). As a result early in his career Rive gained international recognition as a promising young South African writer.

The publication of “Black and Brown Song” (*Drum* May 1955) was a landmark in Rive’s early writing career. He draws here on the material provided by his early years in District Six – a source he was to return to throughout his career. The rather naive sentiments of the opening poem introduce the central theme: the story reveals the extent to which racialised identities have been internalised. It features Johnny-Boy, the leader of a gang of

¹⁷ A useful source of information is the bibliography by Raju and Dubbeld in the first number of *Current Writing* (1989).

petty criminals or “skollies” (compare Themba’s “The Urchin”), who is awaiting the arrival of Amaai and Braim outside the “the dirty Coloured bioscope” (87).¹⁸ Braim’s opening words (to Amaai) reveal his ironic identification in terms of the crudest of racial stereotypes: “Man, you’re a crazy hottentot” (87). Later on he remarks: “Take money from a Kaffir. They’re bloody stupid” (88). In an attempt to prove their superiority, the members of the gang assault, first, an “African boy” (89) and then an adult black man. Their bravado is nothing more than a façade, and as rationale for their actions they offer the classic apartheid-era justification – District Six is “Coloured man’s territory” (90).¹⁹ As in Themba’s “Dube Train” there is an implied critique of the passivity of the crowd, for whom the assault is simply “a spectacle to relieve the monotony”, a “worthy prologue to the bioscope performance to follow” (92). When police arrive on the scene they assume that the “kaffir” is drunk and demand that he produce his pass. The “rainbow” of racial tolerance and harmony invoked by the refrain of the opening song seems a very long way off. The story amounts to an almost allegorical demonstration of the pathology of racism; all the actors in the drama are caught up in a hierarchical, mutually reinforcing and vicious system. The story’s strength lies in its realistic evocation of scene, its dramatisation of the action, and its use of dialogue to capture elements of the local dialect (“Voetsak” (87), “roll me a pill” (88), “the Boere” (89), “pick a pocket for your baas” (89), etc.). At this stage, the need for verisimilitude is foremost in Rive’s mind. Later in his career (*Buckingham Palace, District Six*) Rive refused to use a dialect linked (in his view) to stereotypical representations of “the coloured” (Viljoen 235).

The story also picks up on features of the society of District Six that recur in the writing of Rive, Matthews and La Guma. These include the marginalised youngsters and petty criminals, the impact of the cinema on the habits, perceptions and world view of the residents of the District, and the situating of the coloured working class in terms of a racial hierarchy (between white and black). References to America as, potentially, a land of opportunity, also recur. The unflinching realism of this early story sets the tone for much of the writing that comes out of District Six.

“Willieboy” (*Drum* April 1956) is a more sustained attempt to explore the inner world of the “skollie”. Here the action is entirely internalised; we see Willieboy’s need to compensate for feelings of inferiority or inadequacy (he has just been beaten up and humiliated in front of the cinema audience).²⁰ His alienation and resentment result in part from his mother’s death and his repression of the impulse to grieve. He feels he and his kind

¹⁸ References are to the story as reprinted in Chapman’s *The Drum Decade*.

¹⁹ Its proclamation as a White group area in 1966 (and subsequent destruction) demonstrated just how powerless the coloured community in fact was when faced with the full might of the apartheid state.

²⁰ The same sense of inferiority and inadequacy characterises La Guma’s Willieboy in *A Walk in the Night*.

have been abandoned by God, and he is tempted to take out his frustration on an old coloured woman who could easily have been his mother. Instead he covers his face in shame and weeps “as he had never wept at his mother’s funeral” (49). The final sentence reads: “And a passing newspaper boy grinned and whistled to his screaming companions to come and see the unusual sight of a grown skolly weeping in the grimy midst of a District Six street” (49). The intention here is clearly to get behind the stereotype and humanise Willieboy. The story implies that he is largely a product of his environment, and anticipates the much more extended treatment that Alex la Guma was to give to this theme in *A Walk in the Night*. Rive’s story appeared in *Drum* alongside similar stories from Clarke and Matthews, also featuring “Willieboy”. In the work of these writers, then, Willieboy becomes in effect a generic character whose disaffection and criminality are attributed to life in the apartheid ghetto.

When Gray refers to Rive’s stories as “impressionistic slivers of the poor life, singing of dignity and scenting freedom” (*Free-Lancers and Literary Biography* 162) he no doubt has in mind his first short story collection, *African Songs*, published in (East) Berlin in 1963. The opening story in the District Six section, “Moon Over District Six”, could be described in these terms.²¹ The setting is District Six on New Year’s eve, and the story focuses initially on the “teaser-man” whose refrain helps give the story some semblance of unity: “*Buy my teasers/ See ’em blow in the breezes*” (*African Songs* 27). The narrative consists largely of snatches of dialogue and repartee, and is shot through with humour and ribaldry, but also with the underlying suggestion of violence and menace. The series of snapshots builds a composite picture of a community whose members exhibit considerable variety in terms of class, occupation, disposition and colour. Rive succeeds in capturing the distinctive Afrikaans-based dialect of the District, where linguistic variation is often an indicator of differences in terms of status, education and respectability. The register of the coloured underclass (“*Hier ko’ ’ie law*” (*African Songs* 29) contrasts with the clipped diction of the “prim, fair Coloured lady” who “only spoke English at home” (*African Songs* 28). Unfortunately when Rive included the story in *Advance, Retreat* (over twenty years later) he removed many of these stylistic features. The response of one of the crowd to the intervention of the police (“*Die Law se ding is vim!*” (*African Songs* 29)) is omitted. The dice-player’s interjection, “Your mam’s tree-quarters” (*African Songs* 29) becomes “Your mama’s bloomers!” (*Advance, Retreat* 3). The skollie’s sarcastic, “‘Here’s a penny fer c’llection’” (*African Songs* 30) becomes “‘Here’s a penny for yer collection plate’” (*Advance, Retreat* 4). These moves away from the local, the specific and the dialectical to a more standard English usage may reflect a shift in Rive’s

²¹ It was first published in *Fighting Talk* in 1956, and a revised version introduces Rive’s 1963 anthology, *Advance, Retreat*.

implied audience, from a local audience (in 1956) to a more international audience (in 1983) – something which Viljoen confirms from his contact with Rive over the dramatisation of “*Buckingham Palace*”, *District Six*. Viljoen discusses Rive’s reluctance to use “Kaaps” (the Afrikaans dialect spoken primarily by members of the coloured working class). This may derive from his objection to anything that might promote “colouredism”.²² A (perhaps partly unconscious) desire to distance himself from his District Six roots may also be a factor. The result, as both Viljoen and Wannenburg concede, is a damaging loss of authenticity (Viljoen 235; Wannenburg 33).

“Rain” is the most striking of Rive’s early District Six stories; it is also (after “The Bench”) his most anthologised story.²³ It was originally published in the first number of *Contrast* in 1960 – further evidence of Cope’s influence as mentor and friend. It shows a new assurance in its handling of its material: it has a quite complex structure, it successfully evokes a particular atmosphere and mood, and its presentation of character and situation is convincing. It begins with an impressionistic description of the sights, sounds and smells of District Six on a particular rainy winter evening, with the northwester blowing (its original title was “The north-wester”). This is then contrasted with the warm, stuffy interior of Solly’s ironically named “Grand Fish and Chips Palace” (*African Songs* 32). We are introduced to Solly himself, “in shirt sleeves, sweating, vulgar, and moody” and see him interacting with his clientele.

“Shut ’e damn door. Think you live in a tent?”
 “Ag, Solly.”
 “Don’ ag me. You coloured people can never shut blarry doors.”
 “Don’t you bloominwell swear at me.”
 “I bloomingwell swear at you, yes.”
 “Come. Gimme me two pieces of fish. Tail cut.”
 “Two pieces of fish.”

(*African Songs* 33)

This captures a great deal about Solly and the way he relates to his customers. Of course Solly is a racist – as is evident in his references to “you Coloured people” (*African Songs* 33). However, his attempts to distance himself are undercut by the familiarity with which his customers interact with him (they clearly give as good as they get). The passage establishes the kind of relationship that exists between Solly and his customers, and his actual dependence on their business. Any attempt to read this simply as a protest story (aimed at

²² In an article in *Fighting Talk* in 1962 Rive rejects any attempt at cultural “separatism”, and distances himself from “Colouredism” in particular - “with all its derogatory South African connotation” (“Colouredism and Culture’ 12).

²³ According to Raju and Dubbeld, it had been republished approximately 14 times by 1989.

exposing Solly's racism) would be misplaced. The story is concerned to explore the human interactions that take place, rather than simply to point an accusing finger.

Solly is taken unawares by the very different response of Siena (as yet unnamed) when she enters his shop: she smiles apologetically at him, and addresses him as "baas" (*African Songs* 34). "He . . . had been called a great many unsavoury things in the years. Solly didn't mind. But this caught him unawares. *Please baas*. This felt good. His imagination adjusted a black bow tie to an evening suit. *Please baas*" (*African Songs* 34). The role of the typical "baas" is clearly somewhat unfamiliar to Solly. (The word "baas" is of course a powerful signifier, carrying with it the history of centuries of colonial racism and oppression). The story explores the way in which these two people - apparently at opposite ends of the power spectrum - relate to each other. It conveys the ambivalence of his feelings towards her - a mixture of exasperation, curiosity, latent sexual attraction and (finally, perhaps) compassion or fellow feeling. All of this is triggered by his initial surprise at being addressed as "baas", and the need to readjust his habitual responses.

The story then moves - as Siena becomes the focaliser - from the present to the past, from District Six to Teslaarsdal (in the Boland), from winter to summer.²⁴ Teslaarsdal is described in apparently idyllic terms (it is everything that District Six is not - quiet, rural, tranquil, sheltered, safe) and the community's traditional way of life is rooted in generations of Christian observance, inculcated by the Dutch missionaries. It is in the "nineteenth-century, gabled mission church" that Siena first meets Joseph. His urban sophistication and sexual experience are obviously contrasted with her naivety and simplicity. The story turns out to be a variation on a very old theme: "Boy meets girl; boy loves girl; boy leaves girl"! Siena's hopes of constructing a home and a relationship with Joseph (the father of her unborn child) in District Six founder as she gradually realises the extent of his womanising.

After this extended flashback the narrative returns the reader to the present moment of the opening scene, with the difference that can we now answer the questions that have been posed, implicitly, from the start: we now know who Siena is, whom she is waiting for, and why she should be in some distress (suggested in part by the references to the rain "sobbing against the plate-glass window", the drizzle which films everything with "dark depression", the "shivering weeping neon sign" (*African Songs* 37)). Even Solly, by the end of the story, is in a position to empathise with Siena: he refers to her as "madam", and offers her some fish and chips, "free of charge" (*African Songs* 42). He also offers her the shelter of his shop.

²⁴ Teslaarsdal is a small rural village near Caledon in the Western Cape. It was a rural retreat for Peter Clarke, the artist and writer and close associate of Rive and Matthews. Willemse states that Rive and Clarke visited Teslaarsdal in 1959, and rode on Rive's scooter through the Solitaire valley, the setting for another of Rive's stories, "No Room at Solitaire" (*African Songs* 140-149). According to Willemse, Rive "did not share [Clarke's] enthusiasm for Tessaarsdal and returned to Cape Town earlier than expected" (10)

Rive's skilful, dramatised presentation of Siena's predicament relies in part on the reader's powers of inference. A striking feature of the story is her repeated use of the term "baas" (three times to Solly, and once to the police). Her final words, as she leaves Solly's shop, are "Thank you, my baas" (*African Songs* 43). One is struck by her repeated positioning of herself as *meid* or servant, and her almost involuntary acceptance of her own subordination and powerlessness in the face of white, male authority. One can only conclude that she is so deeply interpellated by a particular historical subject position that she has little prospect of ever freeing herself from victimhood, or from her dependence on racial and patriarchal structures of authority. On reflection, one recognises the extent to which the piety of her Teslaarsdal mission upbringing has led her to this unquestioning acceptance of her subordinate position. It would be simplistic, then, simply to blame her problems on District Six, the depraved urban counterpart of rural Teslaarsdal. The story is designed to explore and expose her powerlessness – but without obviously pointing fingers or simplifying the issues. Anger and the impulse to protest is muted or sublimated in a nuanced exploration of Siena's particular human situation.

"Rain" has received rather cursory attention from some critics (Barnett 195-96; Lee 81-83). My reading of the story clearly differs from Lee's, who refers to Siena as presenting "a figure of collective hope in her generosity and integrity" (78). He suggests (contrary to the evidence of the story) that "Cape Town represents a new and liberating space for Siena in which she is able to recreate herself as a person" (82). He does, however, regard "Rain" as "Rive's most moving and accomplished story involving the intersection of violence, cinema and gender politics" (81). "Rain" clearly illustrates Rive's developing gifts as a short story writer – and his distinctive contribution to South African writing is as a short story writer (rather than as a novelist). Rive included "Rain" in all his subsequent short story collections – *African Songs* (1963); *Quartet* (1963), *Selected Writings* (1977) and *Advance, Retreat* (1983) – one indication of his own high regard for the story. The version in *Advance, Retreat* has some significant textual changes. These were made, it would seem, to mitigate the harshness of the original, or in the interests of political correctness. Solly's original question to Siena when she enters his shop ("You coloured people are worse than kaffirs" (*African Songs* 34) is replaced by the more innocuous "You also live in a blarry tent?" (*Advance, Retreat* 12). The remark of an indignant customer, "You blooming Jews are always making Coloured people out" (*African Songs* 34) is cut from the later version. The "Malay" who offers helpful comments (*African Songs* 34) becomes a "Muslim" in *Advance, Retreat* (12). The most significant change is the cutting of two crucial sentences in the paragraph which registers Siena's initial response to Cape Town: "Passion in a tiny room off District Six. Desire

surrounded by four bare walls, and a rickety chair and a mounted cardboard tract that murmured ‘Bless this House’” (*African Songs* 37). These lines convey the transience of the “passion” that initially brings Siena and Joseph together. The cardboard tract is an ironical echo of the values associated with Teslaarsdal and the mission church (in particular fidelity and the sanctity of marriage) and points to the improbability that she and Joseph will ever establish anything resembling a “home”. The reference also anticipates the moment later in the story when Siena is told to “Go home” by someone outside the cinema. The narrator comments: “Go home? To whom? To what? An empty room? An empty bed? A tract that shrieked its lie, ‘Bless this house’?” (*African Songs* 39). (The last sentence is cut in the later version.) The effect of these cuts is to greatly reduce the force of these references; clearly, Rive would have been better advised to keep to the original version.

THE “PROTEST SCHOOL”?

Rive is partly responsible for popularising the view that almost all writing by black South Africans (at least prior to the 1970s) can be described as “protest writing”. In *Writing Black* he refers to his early stories as “raw angry prose which was accepted for publication by left-wing journals and those catering for an emerging black readership.” These were, he says, “the only outlets [for] the protest fiction we were producing” (*WB* 10). When he meets Alan Paton in 1962, he characterises this as a meeting between “the high point of Liberal Writing in South Africa” and a representative of “the nascent Protest School” (*WB* 21). He offers brief definitions:

Liberal Writing may be loosely defined as writing mostly by Whites about Blacks to move Whites out of their socio-political complacency. . . . Protest writing on the other hand is writing mostly by Blacks articulating their position to a White readership they feel can effect change. Sol Plaatje and Peter Abrahams were amongst its progenitors, forcing South African writing in a new, protest, direction. (*Writing Black* 21)

This summarises a view which Rive seems to have consistently held throughout his writing career. In “The Liberal Tradition in South African Literature” (written a few years later) he provides a more extended definition, and admits to the impact of Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country*: “There was something about this novel which attracted and repelled me at the same time” (20)²⁵. A certain ambiguity emerges: is liberal writing necessarily produced by white writers, and protest writing by black writers? He seems to suggest that it is: “Protest literature is produced by black, unenfranchised non-citizens for whites who have the power to vote and

²⁵ Compare the much less ambivalent responses of the *Drum* writers, discussed earlier.

so can effect change” (26). He also suggests, however, that it is “not merely a matter of the colour of the writers concerned: the writings are qualitatively different because they stemmed from different premises and had different motivations” (21). In his attempts to clarify these differences, Rive points to the “moralism” and concern for the individual which he says characterises the liberal novel; the protest novel, on the other hand, “concerns itself more with the system than with the individuals within it” and invites condemnation of the (white) perpetrators – those who are shown to be responsible for the suffering of the victimised black characters. He goes on to list some of the stylistic features of protest writing:

The anger flows directly out of the narrative sequence and often obscures it It does not deal with subtle shades of difference since it accepts as axiomatic that whites are bad, racialistic and immoral. Writing is at white heat and in exclamation marks so that the final product is often crude, ill-constructed and stylistically weak. *What* is said must take precedence over *how* it is said.
(“Liberal Tradition” 29)

Mzamane says very much the same thing, writing in the 1970s:

We turn to the short story to shout our message loudly and clearly. It doesn’t pay to be too subtle, too many people choose to misunderstand you; there’s little good in being too artistic either, very many people neglect the message and applaud the art. So we protest in categorical, unapologetic terms.
(“The Short Story Tradition” 8)²⁶

Writing some ten years later, in the 1980s, Njabulo Ndebele provides what is essentially a similar definition (he is discussing what he calls “the literature of the spectacular”)²⁷:

To evoke this response, the literature works in this way: the more the brutality of the system is dramatised, the better; the more exploitation is revealed and starkly dramatised, the better. Anyone whose sensibility has not been fashioned by such conditions will find such spectacular demonstration somewhat jarring. . . . The aesthetics of reading this literature, for the black reader, is the aesthetics of recognition, understanding, historical documentation, and indictment. All these go together.
(*Rediscovery* 45-46)

Ndebele points out that a white audience may find this alienating: protest literature may seem (to them) to be almost a contradiction in terms: it is “denounced for being unartistic, crude and too political” (44) – in other words, for its lack of depth, subtlety and complexity. Ironically, however, it is for just such an audience that (according to Rive) this literature is

²⁶ I have already quoted this passage (in my introductory chapter) but feel it can bear repetition here.

²⁷ This is his preferred term for “protest writing”.

written. The intention is to “prick the conscience of the King” (or, in this case, the conscience of white South Africans). Ndebele suggests that this intended audience would reject such writing as aesthetically inferior – and refuse to acknowledge its application to themselves.²⁸ Both he and Mzamane agree that this literature depends for its effect on “the reader’s recognition of the spectacular rendering of a familiar oppressive reality” (*Rediscovery* 45). This highlights the problems raised by Rive’s assumption (echoed by many subsequent critics) that protest writing is explicitly or implicitly directed towards a white audience.²⁹ As Ndebele points out (and as Mzamane assumes), the “*effective* audience” (Ndebele’s italics, 45) for this writing would have been a largely *black* audience, and they would have responded very differently to this writing (the key elements in their response being recognition, affirmation and condemnation). For Ndebele, this also points to the limitation of this kind of writing: “It is the literature of the powerless identifying the key factor responsible for their powerlessness. Nothing beyond this can be expected of it” (46).

Both Rive and Ndebele agree, then, that “protest writing” has a pragmatic or conative orientation, and that the stylistic and structural features of the work are subordinated to this purpose. Their disagreement stems from their different assumptions regarding the audience for protest writing.

Hagena points to the lack of conceptual clarity in the discussion of the terms “liberal realism” and “protest literature” as these have been applied to South African fiction in English (82). The term “protest” has been used as a “‘timeless’ category, integrating works of quite different periods and genres” (82), but it has also been used, she says, in a more restricted sense to apply to a historically specific tradition – black writing from the 1940s to the 1960s – and the example that she cites here is Rive. This is one indication of how influential Rive’s view has been; the assumption that protest writing is directed to a primarily white audience has been left largely uncontested.

Hagena also points to what is, in my view, an even larger problem. Even if one grants the definitions of protest writing offered above (and puts to one side the different assumptions about audience), this definition does not apply to much of the work produced by black writers during this period (the 1940s to the 1960s). Is it in fact true that these writers prioritise the “message” (what is said) over aesthetic considerations (how it is said)? Were the *Drum* writers and the District Six writers in fact attempting to “shout out their message loudly and

²⁸ A case in point would be the initial response to some white South African critics to the poetry of Matthews or Mtshali or Serote when it burst onto the literary scene in the early 1970s. I discuss this in some detail in an article entitled “Mtshali Then and Now” (*Scrutiny* 2, 2000).

²⁹ Watts comes up with a slightly more thoughtful variation on this position: she concedes that while protest writing was “directed at a white readership . . . it found enthusiastic supporters among the entire literate black population, whose indignation and resentment it voiced” (29).

clearly”? Is this writing produced “at a white heat and in exclamation marks”? Is the final product in fact “crude, ill-constructed and stylistically weak”? It will have become obvious (from the discussion of the *Drum* writers in Chapter 4, and of Rive’s short stories in this chapter) that it is reductive to categorise the work of these writers in this way. Nor does this somewhat blinkered approach begin to explore the uncertain, liminal space occupied by the writers of the 1950s, or their ambivalent relationship to the increasingly assertive political movements of the day (the ANC and PAC).

The black South African short story would be a very boring and repetitive genre if it in fact conformed to the descriptions offered by the three critics cited above: one would eventually be repelled by its monotony and predictability. These short stories are in fact much more varied and interesting than these critical accounts suggest; this study resists the attempt to collapse the work of these writers into one undifferentiated category (“protest writing”). There are, for example, obvious and striking differences between the stories of the four *Drum* writers whose work was discussed in the previous chapter (Sentso, Modisane, Themba, Mphahlele) – differences which are at least as important as what they have in common. The discussion of Themba’s work, in particular, shows that the generalisations that have been made about the work of this one writer are often inaccurate or inadequate.

If one looks carefully at Ndebele’s critique of black writing, one becomes aware of his tendency to generalise, and it is not difficult to find inconsistencies or contradictions. We are told, for example, that the writing of both R.R.R. Dhlomo and the *Drum* writers reveals a “penchant for the spectacular”, and that the history of black writing in South Africa is in fact “the glaring history of spectacular representation” (39). At the same time Ndebele comments that “the vast majority of these stories in *Drum* show an almost total lack of interest in the directly political issues of the time”; the writers were attempting to “indulge the lively imagination of the urban population” (40). It is difficult to see how such writing could be regarded a protest writing, or part of the “history of spectacular representation” – unless the word “spectacular” is now being used as a synonym for “sensational”.³⁰ In an attempt to add some clarity, Ndebele says that “at the end of the fifties, and following the banning of the ANC and the PAC, we begin to see the emergence of what has been called Protest Literature” (40). There seems to be almost general consensus that something like this is the case – although I will argue that the distinction is not quite as clear-cut as it might seem.

To summarise: critic after critic repeats the view that the history of black writing in this country is in effect the history of protest writing, and little attempt is made to interrogate

³⁰ I would in fact agree that most of the *Drum* stories don’t attempt to engage in an obvious or overt way with the burning “political issues” of the day.

or problematise the term “protest”, or to distinguish between what often seem like very different kinds and styles of writing. Shava can be taken as representative of this approach: “Black South African literature is a literature of protest. It protests against social, political, economic and military arrangements which deprive black people of civil rights and free expression of their aspirations” (1). South African writers do of course sometimes write stories that protest against these things – and we are about to examine some of these. It can even be argued that (for the black writer in the South Africa) the very act of writing constitutes a protest. The black writers of the 1950s are in effect asserting their right be recognised and accorded a place in society. This is, however, a far cry from a simple assertion that the *Drum* writers were all “protest writers”.

RIVE AS PROTEST WRITER

Rive’s sense of himself (and his fellow writers) as protest writers cannot be entirely misplaced. Rive’s most anthologised short story is “The Bench”,³¹ and in many ways it can be seen as a typical protest story. It opens with the words of a speaker at a political meeting at the Grand Parade in central Cape Town. The speaker employs the discourse of the ANC in the 1950s, with its appeal to human rights and its condemnation of racial discrimination. The scene on the parade is viewed through Karlie’s eyes: he becomes the focaliser as we examine the process that leads him, for the first time in his life, to make a stand and defy.³² The speaker’s words appeal to something “deep inside him” (94), and the suggestion that he, Karlie, enjoys certain basic human rights comes to him with the force of a revelation – “a rush of feeling and an insight he had never explored before” (94). How would “Oubaas Lategan” react, back in his home village in the country? What would “Ou Klaas” think – “Ou Klaas who always said that God in his wisdom made the white man white and the coloured man brown and the black man black?” (94). Ou Klaas represents the coloured farm worker who for generations has served the white “baas”, so that for him the norms of a racist society seem part of the order of nature. As in “Rain”, this naturalising of segregation is underwritten by the teachings of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (or “Sendingskerk”). Karlie reveals himself as a politically naïve, unsophisticated, Afrikaans-speaking man whose respect for authority will have to be challenged if he is ever to take ownership of his own life.

³¹ Raju and Dubbeld note that by 1989 it has been republished 19 times. It is also one of Rive’s earliest short stories. In an interview with Lindfors in 1979 he refers to it as “his first serious writing” and says that he must have been “about seventeen” when he wrote it. It was, he says, “updated and published very much later” (Interview with Bernth Lindfors 320).

³² The implicit backdrop to the story is the ANC’s Defiance Campaign of 1952 which helped to transform the ANC into a mass-based party. The strategy was for small groups of volunteers to defy particular unjust laws (the pass laws, laws segregating amenities) and invite arrest. Rive makes this explicit in a note to the story in *Advance, Retreat* (20).

The white woman in the blue dress, who speaks after the black man, attracts his interest, and a “dreadful resolve” starts to shape itself in his mind: “Yes . . . He, Karlie would challenge With the fervency of a convert he determined that he was going to challenge, even if it meant prison” (96). The meeting over, Karlie makes his way to the station, and when he catches sight of a “Europeans Only” bench,³³ he realises that this is his opportunity: “Slowly it dawned on him. Here was his chance. The Bench” (97).

Up to this point events have been focalised through Karlie. Now the narrator intervenes to spell out the implications: “That bench had concentrated within it all the evils of the system he could not understand. It was the obstacle between himself and humanity” (97). Karlie sits on the bench, “his heart thumping wildly” (98).

What follows is predictable. He is challenged by a white man who orders him off the seat and refers to him as “you black swine” (100). In the original version, this confrontation attracts the attention of members of the crowd on the station concourse, and a lively exchange ensues. Eventually the white man intervenes, a fight breaks out, and Karlie is handcuffed and led away. This represents victory rather than defeat: at the end Karlie knows that “he has challenged and won” and he stares at the policeman “with the arrogance of one who dared to sit on a EUROPEANS ONLY bench” (102).

The story dramatises the growth of political awareness in the somewhat callow mind of this young coloured man, and implies that such acts of resistance will continue and grow as people become aware of their rights. The story can be seen as Rive’s writerly contribution to the Defiance Campaign. Issues are presented in a clear-cut way, and the reader’s sympathy is enlisted for Karlie. The whites (with one or two exceptions) behave in ways that are crudely racialistic. Karlie is clearly the victim here (he has, in the eyes of the implied author and reader, done nothing wrong). The story exposes the prejudices and assumptions that permeate an a racist society. The alternative - the values and norms of a non-racial society – is spelt out by the speakers at the meeting and dramatised in the recognition and awareness that gradually grows in Karlie as he listens. The bench is both an instance and a symbol of this unjust society. The story is susceptible to only one interpretation. This clearly is a story with a message, and it presupposes a receptive reader. It supports the contention that protest writing relied on “a common set of human values and concerns that transcended hierarchical apartheid divisions” (Lee 29). This does not mean that the story is necessarily “crude” or “unartistic” or “too political” (unless one takes the inherently absurd position that writers must avoid dealing directly with politics in their work). It clearly does protest in unambiguous terms against a manifest injustice, but it does so primarily through its exploration of Karlie’s

³³ Rive altered this to “Whites Only” in the 1983 version.

developing awareness. In these respects it is a rather different kind of story from “Rain”. Its protest is more overt or explicit than that in any of the stories so far discussed. What is absent, however, is a declamatory tone or style, and any direct or explicit address to the reader.

(These are features of the more militant form of protest writing associated with the 1970s.)

The protest writing of the 1950s is characterised by restraint and an absence of “sloganeering” (to use another of Ndebele’s terms); here the narrator remains detached and impersonal, and the “message” is allowed to reveal itself through the exploration of Karlie’s consciousness.

The story adopts the stylistic conventions of realism, in particular in its detailed representation of place or setting, and in its sustained inner view of Karlie’s (at times confused or conflicted) thoughts and feelings. It marks an important moment in Rive’s career as a writer: it brought him to the attention of an international audience through its publication in *An African Treasury* (edited by Langston Hughes), and it is partly (or largely?) responsible for his reputation as a protest writer.

If one reads Rive’s early stories one is likely to search in vain for evidence of “raw, angry prose” (*Writing Black* 10), but one will find other protest stories. Of particular interest, perhaps, is a group of stories which make use of the Christian idea of the birth or the return of the Messiah. Although the adult Rive was not a practising Christian, as a boy he attended St Mark’s Church in District Six. In *Writing Black* he describes how he joined the Church Lads Brigade and the church choir and “chanted the responses dressed in cassock, surplice and scratchy Eton collar” (*WB* 6). The professed Christianity of the leaders of the National Party, and the claim that apartheid could be reconciled with biblical teaching, must have presented an opportunity to attack the ruling ideology from within, at one of its weakest points - a tactic employed to devastating effect by Mtwa, Ngema and Simon in their play, *Woza Albert!* (1981). One of Rive’s earliest stories, “The Return” (submitted to *Drum* but not published until *African Songs*), takes as its scenario the return of Christ in the form of a coloured man – referred to simply as “the stranger” - and who finds himself in a typical Karoo dorp. When he witnesses an incident of vicious and gratuitous racism (a white child calls a coloured child a “*verdomde Hotnot*” and tells him to “*voetsak*” (104)), he is puzzled by the unprovoked nature of this verbal assault. He finds himself at the receiving end of this racial bigotry (when he asks for water, he is assaulted by a white youth)³⁴. He makes his way to the “Coloured location” where he finds these racist attitudes replicated: “The Kaffirs are everywhere. I never trust a Kaffir or a White man” (110). Like Ou Klaas (in “The Bench”), the members of this community have come to regard a racially ordered society as divinely ordained, or part of the natural order (“God made us all separate” (111)). The “stranger” attends a service in the

³⁴ The white youth insists on being called “baas”.

segregated church in the main street, where the minister preaches hypocritically about their Christian obligation to their (less fortunate) neighbours. The “stranger” asks himself, “Was this what he had returned to find? Was this the world God made for man to occupy? Was this man’s injustice to man? The cruelty of man towards his brother?” (114). His identity becomes obvious when he wearily shoulders his bundle “even as He had shouldered his cross up the hill of Calvary almost two thousand years before” (114). The story closes with a prayer addressed to the Father by his Son. Its final words (with their obvious biblical echo) are, “*Forgive them, they know not what they do*” (115).

In this story Rive also avoids direct address to the reader, or any explicit expression of anger or indignation. He composes an allegory which is designed to strike at the consciences of his audience (and in this case the implied audience is clearly white). Its strategy is to expose the gulf between Christian precept and social practice. The young boy and the stranger/messiah are clearly victims of a viciously racist society. The message is unmistakable. Readers may, on reflection, question the story’s reliance on Christian teaching – in particular the injunction to “turn the other cheek” and forgive our enemies – “they know not what they do”. They may wonder whether a faith which promotes forgiveness and acquiescence is likely to advance the cause of liberation – but there is no evidence of such questioning in the story itself. In this respect, it can be contrasted with the “The Bench”, with its secular and activist message.

“No Room at Solitaire” (the second of the stories which draws on the Christian myth) bears the unmistakable stamp of Herman Charles Bosman. It employs the conventions of the oral-style tale, uses characters who are (it is assumed) representative members of a white, rural, Afrikaans-speaking community, and its sly satire is reminiscent of Bosman. The impersonal narrator takes what seems to be an almost indulgent view of the foibles and prejudices of the two main characters – clearly a far cry from raw or angry protest. The opening illustrates the ease with which Rive deploys this mode of storytelling:

Now Fanie van der Merwe had every right to be annoyed. Here he stood, owner of the only hotel in Solitaire, wiping glasses in an empty bar on Christmas Eve. The owner of the only canteen till Donkergat, facing empty tables and chairs. . . . Well not quite empty, because Old Dawie Volkwyn sat sullen and morose at the counter. Fanie couldn’t remember when Dawie had not sat on that very stool opposite the kitchen door. To have the only canteen for miles around empty on Christmas Eve.

(*African Songs* 140)

Fanie and Dawie’s lifeworld seems secure, in part because their assumptions have never been challenged. One of these assumptions is the proposition that “Kaffirs could not be educated

beyond Standard Two” (141). With the help of several glasses of brandy, Fanie and Dawie begin to reflect on Christmas and the possible return of the Messiah. Dawie even asks the unthinkable question, ““What if he is not a white man?”” (143). This anticipates the moment when the “kitchen boy” announces that a man and a woman are outside, and in need of shelter (145). Being black, they are told to ““go to hell””. According to Fanie, ““Kaffirs are becoming more and more cheeky”” (145). Further investigation reveals a couple who somewhat resemble Joseph and Mary of the nativity story (the woman is pregnant and seated on a donkey; the man is bearded; they take shelter in the stable). Fanie and Dawie are left to contemplate the possibility that this may indeed be the event foretold in the scriptures. The story’s assumes a reader familiar with the conventions of the oral-style short story (perfected by Bosman). It displays the ignorance and prejudice of Fanie and Dawie, but in such a way as to evoke humour rather than anger. Their racism is largely unconscious, and the cruelty and violence which this often legitimates is absent from this story (compare “The Return” or “Black and White Song”). In its use of gentle mockery and stylistic parody, the story is in fact something of a *tour de force*.

The third story in this group is “Resurrection”.³⁵ The story is focalised through Mavis, the dark-skinned child of a “Coloured” mother whose other children successfully “pass” for white (apparently with her encouragement). They have effectively disowned Mavis and her mother, who is unmistakably “Coloured” (the term is used three times in the story). The mother’s coffin has been placed in the tiny dining room of what is evidently a working-class home. Mavis is clearly the odd one out: her silence and resentment are out of step with the familiar hymns (“Abide with Me”) sung by the relatives and friends. The coffin bears the stark inscription, “Maria Loupser/ 1889-1961/ R.I.P” (129). Mavis’s anger is directed largely at her mother, whose differential treatment of her children has created the situation where she and her “Coloured” friends (and Mavis) are relegated to the kitchen. Now that she is safely dead and in a coffin, she is allowed back into the dining-room! The whole service becomes in effect an exercise in hypocrisy. As in “The Stranger” and “Resurrection”, the narrative strategy is to contrast what should be – the Christian norms and values of the New Testament - with the cruel and inhumane treatment of the mother (and Mavis) by the rest of the family. As in the previous stories, those who are guilty of unchristian behaviour are themselves professed Christians. At times the narrative style is over-insistent in hammering home the central point, and the language is sometimes implausibly brutal: ““You’re no longer useful, Ma,”” Mavis explains. ““You’re a nuisance, a bloody nuisance, a bloody black nuisance. You

³⁵ My page references are to the first version of the story, in *African Songs* (also published in *Quartet*). The version in *Advance, Retreat* (1983) has been quite significantly revised and somewhat truncated.

might come out of your kitchen and shock the white scum they bring here. You're a bloody nuisance, Ma!"³⁶ (131). The mother's limited comprehension of the situation she has apparently helped create – her “ox-like dumbness” (134) - is a little hard to believe, but it does heighten our sense of her as a victim. Her crime is that, as Mavis puts it, she “gave birth to White children” (129). Mavis's treatment of her mother in fact seems almost as insensitive and punitive as that of her siblings – although clearly it proceeds from her own anger and hurt.

Mavis's identification with her mother leads to the climactic moment when her anger and resentment finally erupt:

Mavis felt hot, strangely, unbearably hot. . . . The room was filled with her mother's presence, her mother's eyes, body, soul. Flowing into her, filling every pore, becoming one with her, becoming a living condemnation.

“Misbelievers!” she screeched hoarsely, “Liars! You killed me! You murdered me! Hypocrites! Don't you know your God!” (139)

The “me” here refers to the mother, who has finally spoken through the daughter (hence the title, “Resurrection”). Inexplicably, these final paragraphs, which are essential to the success of the story, were omitted by Rive in the 1983 version of the story. Among his other changes are the omission of references to the mother as “Coloured” (this is replaced by “black”). This suggests Rive's ongoing difficulty with the term “coloured”, but it may also reflect the strategic repositioning suggested by his choice of *Writing Black* as the title of his autobiography (published two years before *Advance, Retreat*).

To what extent does this story (and perhaps his earlier “My Sister Was a Play-White”) reflect the author's own sensitivity at his dark skin colour - or his possible estrangement from other family members? How much of his own anger and resentment is expressed in the final paragraph? According to Viljoen, “[Rive] felt the internalised racism that was prevalent in his family and caused untold strife and disruption” (65). It is, of course, quite possible that Rive's treatment of this issue in these stories simply reflects his own understandable sensitivity to gradations of colour as signifiers of worth or respectability. Whatever the case, these stories protest overtly at discrimination based on colour, and are clearly motivated by his own ambivalent positioning as someone classified as “coloured”.³⁷ This sensitivity may help to explain why protest takes more overt and explicit form in these stories. Their unflinching

³⁶ Viljoen makes the plausible suggestion that this story may owe something to a Langston Hughes story entitled “Father and Son”, from his collection *The Ways of White Folks*. Viljoen suggests that in “Resurrection” “the inexperienced writer [Rive] lays it on too thickly” (156).

³⁷ The extent to which racial politics in fact “infiltrated and demeaned every aspect of [his] daily life” is demonstrated by a letter he wrote to Hughes in 1954 (Viljoen 87).

representation of (and condemnation of) racist behaviour may also owe something to the precedent established by another “coloured” writer, Peter Abrahams. Rive would presumably have read the stories in *Dark Testament* (1942) as well as his novel, *Mine Boy* (1946) and would certainly have been familiar with his influential autobiography, *Tell Freedom* (1954).³⁸ Abrahams was in fact also a contributor to *Drum*, where his autobiography was serialised, and he also helped judge their first short story contest.

One can see these stories of Rive’s as exemplifying certain features of protest fiction. The politicising or conscientising function is dominant, and as a result, there is little doubt as to the “message” which the story is designed to impart. For the stories to be effective, the presented world must approximate closely to the real world. This is most obvious, perhaps, in “The Bench” with its use of actual place names (Cape Town, District Six and Hanover Street). “The Bench” also relies, crucially, on our knowledge that in apartheid South Africa even benches were set aside for the use of specific racial groups.³⁹ As apartheid recedes into the past, some contemporary readers may find it difficult to believe that crude racial epithets – “you black bastard” (97), “You black swine” (100), “black ape” (100), “hotnot” (101) – were frequently employed in everyday interactions. These stories assume a familiarity on the part of the reader with the ways in which racism pervaded the most innocuous of encounters between black and white in apartheid South Africa. A constitutive feature of protest fiction is its reliance on what the reader brings to the story, both by way of information, and through his or her acceptance of a set of human values and norms. Does this mean that protest stories are (to recall Rive’s definition) “crude” or “unartistic”? Is it true that “When message becomes more important than method, literary art suffers” (Lindfors, “Post-War Literature in English” 59)?⁴⁰ Rive’s stories in fact employ techniques which draw on the conventional strategies of realist fiction (such as focalisation, scenic presentation and juxtaposition), and they often demonstrate a sophisticated grasp of irony. While their orientation is clearly towards “protest”, this is nevertheless protest of a restrained kind (the author or narrator avoids direct address to the reader). The use of allegory or irony implies a reasonably sophisticated reader who is able to draw the necessary inferences. Are these stories cruder or “less artistic” than (for example) the stories published in *Drum*? Their various effects all serve to foreground particular injustices or acts of inhumanity – but this is achieved through the use of techniques associated with skilfully composed fictional narratives.

³⁸ Viljoen makes this connection, and suggests that the opening scene in “The Return” may owe something to a similar scene in *Tell Freedom* where the narrator, Lee (then a young boy) is made the target of racial abuse and violence (107).

³⁹ In the 1983 version the “Europeans Only” bench becomes a “Whites Only” bench.

⁴⁰ Cornwell critically dissects this proposition in “Evaluating Protest Fiction” (58-59).

In their implicit endorsement of a non-racial society that respects the integrity and rights of the individual, these stories clearly reflect the moderate, non-racial, alliance-building politics of the ANC in the 1950s. Rive's sympathy with the position of the ANC is most evident in "The Bench" and in "African Song" (*Drum* 1956).⁴¹ In spite of the difficulty of assigning a consistent ideological position to Rive, one can concur with Lee that Rive's politics "coincided with those of many of the *Drum* writers and their contemporaries such as Peter Abrahams, Nadine Gordimer, Jack Cope and Dan Jacobsen . . . in their espousal of liberal values of inclusivity, denial of racial difference and concern for the individual experience" (Lee 77).⁴²

JAMES MATTHEWS

Rive is one of three "District Six" writers who have contributed significantly to South African literature. James Matthews and Alex la Guma were both members of the *Quartet* group, and a discussion of their work will extend our sense of what constitutes District Six writing. It will also reinforce some of the points made (above) about protest writing.

James Matthews is at least as well known as a poet as he is as a short story writer. *Cry Rage*, although banned shortly after publication, was a major influence on the militant "new black poets" of the 1970s.⁴³ Like Rive and la Guma, his writing career begins in the mid-fifties. Although he grew up in the Bo-Kaap, on the other side of central Cape Town from District Six, Matthews refers to the District as "our cultural oasis" ("The Pictures Swirling in My Mind" 102). If Rive was ambivalent about his relationship to District Six,⁴⁴ Matthews was uncompromisingly rooted in the ghetto. He came from a working class family (his mother was a domestic worker, his father an illiterate dock worker) and had limited formal education. He left school at the age of thirteen, and his education as a writer came largely from the books he borrowed from the Hyman Liberman Institute in District Six. "I was an anomaly on our street corner – the only one in our group who read books beyond Westerns, James Hadley Chase or Mickey Spillane, the only one who dabbled in words. A 'slimmetjie'"

⁴¹ "African Song" is a much weaker story than any of the others so far discussed. Its oversimplification of the issues and of the responses of the characters is strongly reminiscent of Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*. This indebtedness is also reflected stylistically, in its striving for a Paton-like rhetoric. It explores the reactions of a naïve African youth as he attends a political meeting, encounters the South African police, and participates in the singing of *Nkosi Sikilel' iAfrica*, the anthem associated with the ANC.

⁴² Over against this one needs to set Rive's professed commitment, in an early letter to Hughes, to the left-wing ideology of the NEUM: "I belong to a school of thought, Trotskyite and Leftist in its outlook . . . who believe in non-collaboration as a political weapon" (30 July 1954; quoted by Viljoen 75).

⁴³ Matthews's co-author was Gladys Thomas. *Cry Rage* has the doubtful distinction of being the first volume of poetry to be banned.

⁴⁴ According to Clarke, until District Six became fashionable, Rive claimed to have been born in "Lower Walmer Estate. Whereas those of us who knew him said, 'Nei, daai burke is van Caledonstraat'" ("Living Through a Chunk of the Century" 46). The more middle-class Walmer Estate bordered on District Six.

(“The Pictures Swirling in My Mind” 100). He published his first story (in *The Sun*, a local newspaper) at the age of 17. During these years he worked as a newspaper seller, a switchboard operator and a freelance reporter (on *The Golden City Post*). He recalls being overawed by meeting Peter Abrahams in District Six. Rive recalls his first meeting with Matthews in the office of Barney Desai:

I realised immediately that he saw in me everything he despised. I not only looked Coloured middle class, but I spoke Coloured middle class and behaved Coloured middle class. I was also a teacher with a Bachelor of Arts degree. In spite of this initial setback we overcame our mutual suspicions and our friendship cemented.

(*Writing Black* 11)

Matthews says of Rive, “Richard was a sonofabitch in many ways” and describes their relationship as a “love-hate relationship We understood each other” (“Living Through a Chunk of the Century” 46). Matthews was a member of a local gang, and this must have brought him a measure of protection and safety.⁴⁵ Clearly, what made a continuing relationship between these two very different people possible was the regard they had for each other as writers.

Matthews’s early stories are unremarkable, and draw quite closely on the circumstances of his own life. “The Day that was Different” (*Cape Times* 15 August 1953) focuses on a young boy’s discovery of his dead grandmother. “The Years Behind” (*Cape Times* 25 December 1953) deals with the relationship between a young boy and his mother, who is trapped in an unhappy marriage. “Third Class” (*Cape Times* 2 March 1957) describes a ride in a third class railway carriage. The protagonist, Themba, is drawn into a gambling game, and ends up losing his money. Matthews describes these early stories as “not overtly political”, and adds, “My stories always depicted my background” (“The Pictures Swirling in My Mind” 102).

The four stories published in *Quartet* show considerable development in terms of style and structure and the political awareness. Matthews attributed his developing political awareness to “the lessons [he] imbibed” from Wolfie Kodesh’s talks on the street corner as he sold *New Age*, the newspaper for which Alex la Guma wrote a regular column.⁴⁶ His developing literary awareness resulted from his reading and his membership of an informal writers’ group. The group included Matthews, La Guma and Wannenburg; for a time they

⁴⁵ Rive recalls visiting a cinema with him “in the rough area above Bree Street”, and visiting his local cinema, where he was treated with “deference and respect”. The cinema was crowded, and shrouded in “a pall of dagga smoke”, but he and Matthews were ushered to a vacant row of seats, reserved for members of his gang (*WB* 11-12).

⁴⁶ In contrast, Rive obtained his political education from his formal education at Trafalgar High School, where many of the teachers were aligned with the NEUM.

met regularly to read each others' stories, and four stories from each writer were subsequently published in *Quartet*.

The best known and most anthologised of Matthews's stories is "The Park", also the title story of the collection published in 1974. The story explores the reactions of a young coloured boy to his exclusion from a "Whites Only" park. It exploits the potential offered by an innocent protagonist whose natural impulses are thwarted by a law which he does not understand. His response, when told to get off the see-saw, is one of incredulity: "Why must I get off? What have I done?" (*Quartet* 130). The reader, of course, can supply the answer: he has done nothing! He is an innocent victim. The story derives its effect from the reader's spontaneous recognition of the injustice and unfairness of the situation. His impotent rage at his exclusion is powerfully captured in the scene where he watches other boys playing in the park;

From the other side of the railings he watched them – the boys kicking the ball, the children cavorting on the grass, even the old men, senile on the seats; but most of all, the children enjoying themselves with what was denied him and his whole body yearned to be part of them.

"Shit it!" he looked over his shoulder to see if anyone had heard him. "Shit it!" he said louder. "Shit on them! Their park, the grass, the swings, the see-saw, everything! Shit it! Shit it!"

His small hands impotently shook the tall railings towering above his head.
(*Quartet* 134)

The full human dimension of the young boy's frustration and yearning and anger is captured in this scene, and is allowed to speak for itself (any authorial comment would be redundant). Although his protest is "impotent", when read in its historical context it can perhaps be seen to foreshadow the protest of a later generation of black students whose anger and frustration would spill over onto the streets of Soweto.⁴⁷

The story's success depends on its accurate representation of race-based discrimination in apartheid South Africa. It represents the experience of every coloured or black boy or girl who must sooner or later encounter exclusion and discrimination on the grounds of colour. The words of the sign at the entrance to the park make this appallingly clear: "He struggled with the red letters on the white background. 'Blankes Alleen. Whites Only'" (*Quartet* 130). These words, on innumerable signs, are (or were) familiar to anyone who lived in South Africa at that time. They were in fact so familiar that they would often be

⁴⁷ The young boy's rage at the system which denies him his most elementary rights is clearly something which Matthews still carries with him. His 1972 collection of poetry was entitled *Cry Rage*, and the *Mail and Guardian* article on the occasion of the publication of his novel, *The Party is Over* (1997), is entitled "Still Raging After all these Years". Matthews was then aged 68.

taken for granted. By revealing its impact on the young boy, the story in effect defamiliarises the sign, and makes it palpable. Like the “Whites Only” bench in Rive’s story, this sign comes to stand for the whole apartheid system – a system that will deny the boy the most elementary rights in the country of his birth.

All of the above is implicit in the ominous final lines of the story. “At the entrance of the park the notice board stood tall, its shadow elongated, pointing towards him” (*Quartet* 141). This notice board will continue to cast its shadow over the rest of this boy’s life. This reading is reinforced by similar references in the writing of other black South Africans. At the end of *Tell Freedom*, as he is about to board the ship that will take him to England, Abrahams writes:

All my life had been dominated by a sign, often invisible but no less real for that, which said:

RESERVED FOR EUROPEANS ONLY.

Because of that sign I had been born into the filth and squalor of the slums and had spent nearly all my childhood there. . . . I had the marks of rickets on my body, but I was only one of many, not unique. (310)

Similarly, Modisane writes: “The shadow of apartheid spreads long over my life, I have to live with it, to come to terms with its reality and to arrange myself under the will of its authority” (*Blame me on History* 56). These references to a reality that exists outside of the fictional world are – as we have seen - a constituent element of the protest story. The story depends for its effect on a reader who can understand or reconstruct the context.

Other elements of the story contribute to its effect. The boy comes from a poor, working-class, inner-city neighbourhood (in all probability District Six). The description of his home suggests a depressing environment, dominated by the complaints of the mother and the silence of the father. He can only remember one moment, long ago, when “almost as if by mistake” (131) his father had taken him to a fairground and he had felt something of the wonder and excitement that he associates with the park. After the family meal he escapes into the “narrow streets” which constitute his only playground, but is distracted by thoughts of the park and walks away from the other children. As he thinks of the park he is filled with rage, “Rage against the houses with its streaked walls and smashed panes filled by too many people; against the overflowing garbage pails outside doors; the alleys and streets: and against a law he could not understand . . .” (*Quartet* 136 -37). His rage is directed against everything that frustrates his desire to sample something of what life seems to offer.

The story leaves us with a powerful image of the young boy, who has entered the park at night, and, seated on a swing, is reaching higher and higher: “He could touch the moon. . . . The earth was far below. No bird could fly as high as he. Upwards and onwards he went”

(*Quartet* 140). The image of a bird in flight suggests his longing for freedom and transcendence. This brief moment is cut short by the attendant, ironically another black man, who is himself trapped in the apartheid system. Go home!’ he screamed, his voice harsh, directed against the system that drove him against his own. ‘If you don’t get off, I go for the police. You know what they do to you’” (*Quartet* 141).

The boy, his mother, and even the park attendant, are presented as victims, and this is a standard feature of this mode of protest writing: it appeals to the reader’s sense of justice, and to a set of norms and values (human, moral, or political) which are clearly violated by the apartheid state. While this may seem to be a simple formula to follow, the story avoids preaching at the reader. It also manages to avoid over-simplifying the socio-political realities which it represents. The precision and vividness of the writing suggests an author who is fully aware of and in control of what he is doing. Like the other protest stories, “The Park” is susceptible to only one kind of reading or interpretation, but this is (presumably) a strength rather than a weakness: the protest needs to be made as clearly and unambiguously as possible.

ALEX LA GUMA

Alex La Guma is best known for the series of novels he wrote, beginning with *A Walk in the Night* (1962) and culminating in *Time of the Butcherbird* (1977), all of which were published outside the country. As a result of his banning in 1962 (in terms of the Suppression of Communism Act), none of his works could be published or read inside South Africa. Unlike the other writers so far discussed, La Guma’s political commitments probably outweighed his literary commitments: he experienced detention without trial, banning and house-arrest (for five years, from 1962), and he even survived an assassination attempt. He was also one of the 156 accused in the celebrated Treason Trial which ran from 1956 to 1960. La Guma left the country on an exit permit in 1966, and the rest of his life in exile was dedicated to working for the ANC. At the time of his death in 1985 he was the ANC’s representative in Cuba. Politics – and the commitments that La Guma entered into as a member of the SACP, SACPO and the ANC – virtually determined the course of his life. One might therefore expect to find these commitments reflected in this literary work. Is this in fact the case? Is he an example of a “protest” writer? Discussion of these issues – which preoccupy most of his critics – will be limited by the need to focus on his (somewhat neglected) short stories.

Like Rive, La Guma was born in District Six, but the similarity almost ends there. La Guma came from a working class background, and his father had a long history of political

and trade union activism in the ICU, the Communist Party and the ANC.⁴⁸ In “Memories of Home” La Guma refers to the picture of Lenin which hung on the wall of the living room in their District Six house, and in his interview with Abrahams he states that “his father had a great deal to do with moulding [his] philosophy and political outlook” – and with guiding him towards “more serious works, both political and cultural” (“The Real Picture” 18).

Another picture, however, also hung in the same room, “a big old-fashioned photograph in a gilt frame of my grandfather He watched sternly from his place on the paper wall, his eyes sharp . . . with his white sidewhiskers bristling and his bearded chin hard as a plank above the starched rampart of his high collar” (“The Picture in the Parlour” 167). Like many families of “mixed” parentage, the La Gumas seem to have preferred to acknowledge the white grandparent. The picture of this Victorian gentleman hanging opposite (or alongside?) the picture of Lenin (“the man in the ordinary cloth cap”) makes a fascinating comparison. The description of the parlour (with its cool interior, its crowded furniture, crocheted antimacassars, cane hall-stand and “motley of Victorian bric-a-brac” (167)), also suggests that the La Guma family was not immune to the claims of petit-bourgeois respectability.⁴⁹

La Guma’s autobiographical pieces (published in *The African Communist*) are teleological in nature, and trace the evolution of his thinking to the point (in 1947) when he joins the Communist Party. They reveal his youthful idealism (he attempted to volunteer for the Spanish Civil War while still a schoolboy!) and his conscious identification with the working class.⁵⁰ He was aware from an early age of the poverty and hardship of the community in which he found himself: “The grinding misery of the slums destroyed our people, blighted their lives before they had time to grow up” (“Why I Joined the Communist Party” 59). Unlike the other writers of the fifties, his explanation of these conditions went beyond racial oppression: “I read ‘The Iron Heel’ and I saw in Jack London’s ‘people of the abyss’ my own community ground down under the weight of poverty, oppression, ignorance. Could it be that oppressed people all over the world were the same” (59). The Marxist narrative provided him with the means to understand “the grinding misery of the slum” in

⁴⁸ Detailed information about the political history of both Jimmy and Alex la Guma is readily available in, for example, the Introduction to *Liberation Chabalala* (edited by Odendaal and Field) and in Alex la Guma’s biography of his father, written in the 1960s but only published in 1997. Roger Field’s doctoral dissertation also contains a wealth of information about La Guma’s life and times, and I would like to acknowledge the benefit I have derived from reading his work.

⁴⁹ In “The Picture in the Parlour” La Guma narrates the history of the portrait of Lenin. His father visited the Soviet Union in 1927, and came back with the picture. He subsequently presented it to his son on the occasion of his marriage (in 1954). The picture accompanied Alex on all his subsequent moves, including his move into exile in London. Clearly, the picture of “the man in the workaday suit and the cloth cap, looking into the future” (169) acquired for La Guma a kind of talismanic significance, and came to represent his life-long commitment to the communist cause.

⁵⁰ He chose to leave secondary school before matriculating, and found employment as a worker at Metal Box, where he helped to organise a strike.

terms of class struggle, and situate it within the narrative of colonisation and global capitalism.

In La Guma's case, however, conscious identification with the working class went hand in hand with a revulsion at the conditions of slum life. "Why I Joined the Communist Party" opens with the following description: "My recollection of life seems to have been an alleyway. It faced the front window of the house and it was always piled with overflowing dustbins that left most of their contents behind in pools of stagnant water, so that we breathed a horrible odour of decay all the time" (57). For all his faith in the working class as a potentially progressive force, La Guma's depictions of District Six are absolutely un sentimental, and dwell in uncompromising detail on the stench, the decay, and the mould that accumulates in this apparently run-down, semi-derelict area.⁵¹ When he comes to write *A Walk in the Night* (in 1959-1960), the district is still very much present, and nostalgia and memory have in no way softened its impact (compare the somewhat rose-tinted retrospective view in Rive's *Buckingham Palace, District Six*).

La Guma's capacity as a story teller manifested itself early on. As a young boy, he and his friends would gather under a street lamp, and it was "always [his] job to tell a story" which he would "concoct out of [his] imagination" ("The Real Picture" 22). Later, as a worker at Metal Box, he would construct narratives of another kind, designed to conscientise his fellow workers: "At lunch time I found myself talking to the workers. I seemed to have become a great talker. I talked about lots of things, I remember. International news, South African politics, the colour bar" ("Why I Joined the Communist Party" 60). His fiction emerges as a product of these two impulses. In all probability his work as a journalist helped to him to make the transition to a writer of short, fictional narratives set in District Six. La Guma started work as a journalist with *New Age*⁵² in 1955: "They asked me to take a job and that is when I started to write seriously. I worked as a reporter on *New Age* until 1962. I also produced a column of mostly satirical, humorous observations for the paper and I suppose, inevitably, I sat down and wrote short stories" ("The Real Picture 19). La Guma, then, provides yet another instance of the intimate link between journalism and story telling. A selection of La Guma's journalism, entitled *Liberation Chabalala: The World of Alex la Guma*, was published in 1993, and many of his articles reveal the presence of a short story writer in the making. One such article, "Identical Books", provides a lively, partly humorous account of the coloured community, beginning with an apocryphal story which supposedly

⁵¹ Field notes that La Guma shares with [Jack] London a horror and disgust at the degradation and degeneration that slum conditions cause" (84).

⁵² *New Age* started life as *The Guardian* in 1937, and was the longest-running and most influential of South Africa's "alternative" left-wing newspapers. During the 1950s it was controlled and run by members of the Communist Party (Odendaal and Field xi).

explains their origins. The rest of the article consists of a series of vignettes or mini-narratives, each capturing some aspect of the life of his community. The mission-church background is contrasted with a typical Saturday night dance in District Six:

The hall is crowded by nine 'o clock and the band has got into its stride. The drummer has taken his coat off and the saxophonist is tireless. The bass-man's head wags with each slap of the strings. "Mister Sandman give me a dream. . ." Kwela. Commercial quadrilles: Arm in arm, corner swing, half-way, home James. Sambas all the way from Brazil. The girls are gay, wild and ecstatic. The boys are sharp in their zootsuits, yellow socks and Tony Curtis haircuts. . .
(*Liberation Chabalala* 4)

This vividly captures the particular scene, and at the same time suggests something about this community with its eclectic musical tastes and its fascination with Hollywood and American popular culture. Other vignettes depict the shebeen subculture and reveal the popularity of the district with visiting sailors. This is followed by snatches of dialogue involving first, a docker, and then two office cleaners. The closing résumé suggests an underlying belief in a shared humanity, with its assertion that people are like "identical books with only different dustjackets" (5). The detailed social observation, the snatches of dialogue, the use of scenic presentation and the compositional skill all point towards the story-telling techniques that La Guma develops to full effect in his short fiction. In particular, his ability to capture the patois of the District helps to give his fiction a life-like quality. In order to achieve this, as Field points out (quoting McCormick), La Guma would have had "'to be bilingual in English and Afrikaans, biadialectical in Afrikaans, [and] able to code-switch'" (Field 211; McCormick 92, 100).

La Guma's earliest published story is "A Christmas Story" (*Fighting Talk* December 1956/January 1957), and already some of the distinctive features of his short fiction are evident. The story is set at "Ma Henry's" – a shebeen in District Six – where the narrator and his pals "Hammerkoppie" and "South West" are sitting drinking. It is Christmas eve, and they reminisce about a particular church meeting held in "the old Union bioscope". The clapping and singing are interrupted by the arrival of members of the Dragon Gang ("hardcase rookers who smoke dagga and rob and kill all over the place" 6). Unexpectedly they experience a conversion, climb on the stage and lay down a variety of weapons. The conversion, however, is short-lived: word is brought that a rival gang is raiding their territory – "and you can't expect a man to stay saved when a thing like that happens" (6). This rather slight story relies heavily on anecdote, but introduces us to the District Six setting, makes use of realistic dialogue, and contrasts religious sentimentality with the realities of life in the district. It

avoids anything that might resemble a serious “message”. It introduces us to the La Guma world, which (as Field points out), is “largely a world of male coloured working class and lumpenproletarian characters” (125).

The first story of La Guma’s to attract attention was entered into a competition run by *New Age*, and published under the title “Etude” (subsequently “Nocturne”) on 24 January 1957.⁵³ Advertisements for the competition encouraged entrants to “let life be [their] inspiration”. The advertisement continued:

We live in a country where drama, tragedy, pathos, humour and farce constantly rub shoulders – rich material for the writer’s pen. There is no lack of incidents or characters, from the past or the present, around which to write a good story. Why not try your hand at dramatising your experiences and feelings? Let life itself be your raw material.

(*New Age* 12 May 1955; quoted by Field 127)

This reads like a realist manifesto, and could have provided guidelines for many of the writers discussed in this and the previous chapter. Clearly, La Guma often draws directly on his own life experience and observation for the material of his short fiction. “Nocturne” (the story he submitted in response to this advertisement) is remarkably controlled and assured; it rests on the incongruity between two different scenes and settings – that of the working-class pub (“the Duke’s Head”) and that of the upstairs apartment where a young woman is playing classical music on a piano. We are introduced to “three of them” sitting at a table in the Duke’s Head, and from their conversation we infer that they are criminals planning a robbery. One of the three, Harry, is struck by the music that filters in from across the street: ““Did you rookers⁵⁴ hear that’?” (111). Their dialogue identifies them as streetwise gangsters who resort to crime as a means of survival. What differentiates Harry is his response to the music, and Moos’s laconic dismissal (““Give me a wakker jol any time”” (111)) highlights the unexpectedness of Harry’s reaction. One is encouraged to rethink the snap judgements one tends to make about others – especially those who differ from one in terms of class or colour or occupation. Can one simply categorise Harry as a “gangster”?

Drawn by the music, Harry enters the house opposite, climbs the stairs, opens the door – and apologises for the intrusion (this is the same person we have just seen planning a violent robbery!). He enters the upstairs room, “awkward as a tramp being admitted to a parish tea” (114). The interior of the room (“neat, dustless, little tables cluttered with bric-a-brac”) is faintly reminiscent of the parlour in La Guma’s parents’ house. The details suggest a sheltered

⁵³ Subsequent references will be to the slightly shorter version published in *Quartet*, unless otherwise stated.

⁵⁴ Literally, “smokers” – probably implying that they smoke dagga (marijuana).

world of middle-class respectability, piety and decorum – in stark contrast to the larger setting of the street and the surrounding district. When the pianist tells Harry that she “‘studied in a convent’”, he asks, “‘What’s it [the music] bring you? It’s pretty, but what’s it bring you?’” (114). In its understated way, the story presents us with a contrast in styles, in frames of reference, in systems of value. At the risk of oversimplifying, this difference can obviously be stated in class terms (aspirant middle class as opposed to working class). Surprisingly, perhaps, given La Guma’s materialist world view, the story seems to endorse the values associated the more refined, middle-class world which the young woman inhabits. Her answer to Harry’s question – “‘Money’s not everything’” (114) – implies the existence of other, less worldly values. The *Moonlight Sonata* falls on Harry “like gentle rain” – suggesting the succour it brings to someone deprived of any contact with art or music (the “finer things of life”!). Earlier, the music had been compared to “a spring of cool water in a wasteland” (113). The story does, by implication, protest against social and political conditions which prevent human beings from realising their potential. Harry says at one point: “‘I never had the chance to listen to this kind of stuff. . . . High bugs go to the City Hall to hear it’” (115).⁵⁵ If this is a “protest story”, it is protest of a subtle and somewhat muted kind, and does not preclude the exploration of character, setting and situation.⁵⁶

For the reader familiar with La Guma’s fiction, this early story carries his signature as unmistakably as a thumbprint would. It introduces us to the distinctive features of the La Guma “world”, a world which is degraded, run-down and ugly, and inhabited by people whose lives seem to lack substance and meaning. The following paragraph could have been lifted from the pages of *A Walk in the Night*:

Drab and haunted-looking people sat in doorways looking like scarred saints among the ruins of abandoned churches, half listening, gossiping idly, while the pinched children shot at each other with wooden guns from behind overflowing dustbins in the dusk. (113)

This imaginative coherence helps to account for the power of his fiction, expressed through description of the decaying physical environment, and through the use of thematic imagery. In “Nocturne” one finds a cluster of images which contributes to the idea of a degraded or

⁵⁵ Harry’s words suggest the gulf that separates him from those who attend concerts at the City Hall. Interestingly, as a youngster La Guma would often walk down to the City Hall and attend concerts.

⁵⁶ The version in *Quartet* omits the original ending, which includes a brief description of the robbery. At a line-up of suspects Harry gives himself away to the watchman when he inadvertently starts to whistle the piece of music he had heard earlier (he watchman remembers him whistling it at one point during the robbery). The shorter version avoids this somewhat clichéd ending, and leaves one on a more inconclusive note, thinking about the way in which Harry responds to the girl at the piano: “‘He thought, sentimentally, that it would be real smart to have a goose that played the piano like that’” (116).

profane world. In the opening paragraph a haggard man sits at the bar sipping his drink “like a lone penitent in a cathedral” (111). In the paragraph above, the people sitting in doorways are compared to “scarred saints among the ruins of abandoned churches” (113). Surprising, perhaps, given his own atheism, La Guma frequently make use of religious imagery to suggest a devalued or abandoned world. In JanMohamed’s terms, “the structure and style of his writing reflect the spiritual attenuation of life that results from socio-political disenfranchisement” (226).⁵⁷ A feature of La Guma’s style is the use of striking (but sometimes over-insistent) imagery to draw attention to some incongruity. Examples in “Nocturne” are the similes involving an alley cat, a Siamese cat, and a terrier.

If “Nocturne” points forward to *A Walk in the Night*, La Guma’s other early story, “Out of Darkness” (*African South*, October 1957) anticipates both “Tattoo Marks and Nails” (1964) and *The Stone Country* (1967), all of which draw on La Guma’s own experience of incarceration in the Roeland Street jail in Cape Town. The narrator (evidently a man of some education – we never learn why he is in prison) has his interest piqued by the person alongside him who is serving ten years for culpable homicide. His imprisonment has apparently “unhinged him”, but from odd, disconnected sentences and references to “Cora” and “Joey” the narrator manages to piece together his story (*Quartet* 33, 34). In spite of his nickname – “Ou Kakkelak, Old Cockroach” – he has a cultivated manner and shows glimpses of insight. His story centres on his love for Cora, who succumbs to the temptation to “pass” for white – a recurring theme for this group of writers (*Quartet* 37, 38). As a result, their plans to marry are aborted. It turns out, however, that it was not Cora whom “Ou Kakkelak” had killed but Joey, a young friend who had called him a “damn fool for going off over a play-white bitch” (*Quartet* 38). The killing is partly motivated by the need to protect Cora’s honour. The concept of honour recurs in La Guma’s short fiction, often in the most unlikely places – an indication, perhaps, of the possible influence of Hemingway on La Guma’s early short stories. This concept is central to “Battle for Honour”, the only story of La Guma’s to be published in *Drum* (November 1958). It features a bar-room brawl between an ex-boxer-turned-gangster and one of the “sharks” (the good-for-nothing drifters) who hang around the entrance to the pub.

“Out of Darkness” features a story within a story, and in this respect its structure resembles that of “A Christmas Story” and “Tattoo Marks and Nails”. The (unnamed) first-person narrator acts as a kind of frame-narrator (and appears to be more educated and

⁵⁷ This aspect of La Guma’s work has led Wade to describe him as South Africa’s Graham Greene – as Wade admits, a rather surprising designation, given La Guma’s avowed Marxism (“Art and Morality” 167).

discriminating than his companions). This story also introduces us to the world of the prison, and to the denizens who roam this “jungle” (*Quartet* 35):

The next night started much the same. The heat was overpowering, and the stench of bodies increased quickly. Men fought and clawed around the water buckets, snarling like jackals around their carrion. The cave man, Smiley Adams, hurled men from the centre of the turmoil, growling and snapping at his cringing subjects. (Quartet 36)

The “cave man”, Smiley Adams, prefigures the other “cave men” who rule their respective prison domains – “the Creature” in “Tattoo Marks and Nails” and “the Beast” in *The Stone Country*. “Out of Darkness” explores the inner world of one of these inmates, and it reveals (in this unlikely setting) the existence of notions of romantic love and honour. Like “Nocturne”, it reveals La Guma’s interest in interiority, or in probing below the surface to explore motivation and character. The reduction of this educated and sensitive former schoolteacher to “Ou Kakkalak” (he is at the bottom of the pecking order in his cell, and the butt of all jokes) is in fact tragic. The racism which is endemic in society (not least in the coloured community) has led to his undoing. Madness becomes for him a refuge from a world of deceit and betrayal; the person who has betrayed him is Cora, the woman he loved (and whose honour he still seeks to defend). Like Rive’s “My Sister was a Play-White” and “Resurrection”, this story points to the self-estrangement that results from the internalisation of racist norms. More obviously, the description of conditions in the racially segregated cells of the Roeland Street jail is an indictment of the systemic racism and inhumanity that pervades the penal system (as well as the larger society). Here there is an obvious continuity between La Guma’s journalism and his fiction. The images he employs in “Ten Days in Roeland Street Jail” could be transferred almost verbatim to the short story: “In the yard the strong and the violent are kings. The law of the jungle has returned” (*Liberation Chabalala* 16). In another article, “The Law of the Jungle”, he describes how “the weak are doomed to an existence of terror and depravity”, and refers to a particular convict (the prototype for “the Creature” and “the Beast”) who “prowls like a savage gorilla in captivity, giving vent to all the primeval brutalities forced on him by frustration” (*Liberation Chabalala* 18).

These early stories indicate the sophistication of La Guma’s short fiction, and anticipate themes or preoccupations which recur in his later work. The two stories that La Guma published in *Black Orpheus* in 1960 are protest stories of a more obvious or conventional kind. In both cases the target is clearly the Immorality Act and the Mixed Marriages Act – legislation which impacted more acutely on the coloured community than on any other racially defined group. The setting of “A Glass of Wine” is, once again, a shebeen

where the first-person narrator and his friend Arthur (who had earlier appeared in “Battle for Honour”) are passing the time. A boy with “red-white hair” and “a pink-white skin” enters (*Quartet* 91). The conversation turns to the girl that the rather shy young man has come to visit, and Arthur encourages him: “He is an awake boy, a real smart juba, and I like him” (*Quartet* 93). When the girl enters she is described in unambiguously affirmative terms (her skin is “the colour of amber wine” and she blushes with shyness). “It’s the love”, Ma Schrikker concludes, “Love. Just like in the bioscope” (*Quartet* 94). The rather inebriated Arthur proposes a toast to the “bride and groom” (*Quartet* 94) – and can’t understand why his comments bring the girl to the verge of tears. The narrator eventually explains: “You know that white boy can’t marry the girl, even though he may love her. It isn’t allowed” (*Quartet* 96). This is a (quite unusual) instance of the narrator spelling out what must have been obvious to the reader (but not, apparently, to Arthur). The story is designed to protest against a particular law – in this case, a law which regulates what would normally be the most private and personal areas of an individual’s life.

“Slipper Satin” is a much more probing exploration of the plight of Myra, who returns from a four-month prison sentence (for the “crime” of having an affair with a white man) to the excited gossip and condemnation of her own community – or at least, of its female members. By transgressing, she has done what none of them has dared to do; by condemning her, they assert their own rectitude – and at the same time demonstrate the extent to which they have adopted the norms of a racist society. The story exposes and comments on the stigma or “shame” which was associated with colour. By involving herself in a relationship with a white man, Myra acts as a reminder of this shame. In “Shame and Identity: the Case of the Coloured in South Africa”, Wicomb examines this pathology of shame, and suggests that it is located in the very word *Coloured*.⁵⁸ This story provides a virtual case-study. We see the way in which Myra is judged by her own community: “And the needle-sharp eyes followed her all the way, suspicious, angry and suitably happy, too, that there was another victim for the altars of their gossiping” (*Quartet* 68). If the men react differently, this is largely because of their prurient interest and their sexist conditioning: “A man didn’t begrudge another this kind of victory, even if it had been across the line” (68.) Her mother greets her with the words, ““Oh. So you’re back. Back with your shame and disgrace . . . We are all good, decent people but you brought us shame”” (69). The man whom Myra evidently loved, and who would have married her, is described (without justification) by the mother as ““a white loafer”” (69); in her eyes, Myra is herself no better than ““a whore”” (70).

⁵⁸ As she points out, the literary origins of the “shame-bearing coloured” can be traced to Sarah Gertrude Millin’s *God’s Stepchildren* (100).

Myra's brave and generous reaction to this vilification reveals her strength and independence: she sees "no disgrace in [loving] a man, no matter what colour he is or where he comes from" (69). She does not allow her bitterness to consume her, and she does not blame others (least of all her lover) for her situation.⁵⁹ She feels sorry for all of them – her mother, her sister, even "those women up the street" – and she feels sorry for Tommy who "couldn't stand up to it" (73). Her sister Adie is about to do the conventional "right thing" and marry (in the mother's words) "a nice boy of her own kind" (70). Myra will continue to live with her mother, and look after her - and will find a way to earn the eight guineas her sister needs for a dress on her wedding night – even if it means prostituting herself. Myra's response to her vilification throws into sharp relief the meanness and viciousness of those around her (her sister excepted). As Abrahams points out, the stigma that she carries (in the eyes of others) "dooms her to non-marriage" and probable unemployment (31) – and possibly to a life of prostitution.⁶⁰ The story highlights the manifest cruelty and injustice of a law that criminalises her "affair" and leads to the suicide of the man she would otherwise have married. Like "A Glass of Wine", this is clearly a protest story, but it is also searching exploration of the roots of shame, prejudice and intolerance.

Two further stories will serve to illustrate the nature of La Guma's achievement in his short fiction. "A Matter of Taste" creates a scenario somewhat reminiscent of Hemingway's "The Battler": the narrator and his companion, "Chinaboy", are camping out at a derelict railway siding.⁶¹ A ragged, unkempt man approaches and asks if he can join them (the "ceremony" of pouring coffee is about to "commence" (*Walk* 120⁶²)). The visitor – identified as "the white boy" – watches as they prepare coffee. Although they address him as "Whitey", they make him feel welcome. Their conversation revolves around food, and the contrast between their poor meal (they don't even have bread) and the grand food that they might be eating at a restaurant: "Pass me the roast lamb, I said sarcastically" (121). When "Chinaboy", who once worked as a waiter, describes the meal he might be eating, "Whitey" interjects to say that "it's all a matter of taste. Some people like chicken and others eat sheep's head and beans" (122). He seems to have a point, but Chinaboy corrects him: "'Bull, it's a

⁵⁹ In Tommy's case we have, in embryonic form, another story within a story. We learn that when the police arrived, he took a gun and shot himself – perhaps because he could not live with the disgrace.

⁶⁰ Ironically, she may end up become the "whore" her mother accuses her of being.

⁶¹ In Hemingway's story "The Battler", Nick comes upon two men sharing a makeshift meal round an campfire alongside a railway line. The two allow Nick (who has just been thrown off a freight train) to share their meal. The coffee-making ritual may owe something to another Hemingway story, "Big Two-Hearted River". Stories like "A Matter of Honour" and "The Gladiators" also have something of a Hemingway ambience. Both writers share an interest in the codes of the professional boxer, the gangster, and the drifter, and with whatever it is that enables an individual to survive with dignity.

⁶² The story is one of those published together with *A Walk in the Night*. Page references are to the Northwestern University Press edition (1967).

matter of money” (122).⁶³ “Whitey” tells an amusing anecdote (about a fellow with no money who sits down at a smart restaurant, orders a glass of water, and then asks, ““Why ain’t the band playing?”” (122)). Chinaboy responds with a story of his own. In the end the narrator and his companion help “Whitey” to jump a ride on a passing freight train. Before leaving, he thanks them for the “supper” and they shake hands. Chinaboy’s parting words are, “Good luck, pal!” (124). As the train disappears into the distance, “Whitey” raises his hand in a salute, and they reciprocate. Chinaboy’s final line - ““Why ain’t the band playing? Hell!”” (124) - is much more than just a reference to the punch line of “Whitey’s” story (although it does also refer back to their shared amusement at the story). Given the implied context (the intolerance and segregation that are the societal norms), his comment suggests that what the three of them have accomplished is rather remarkable. They have managed to interact as equals, share their meagre resources, and demonstrate goodwill in the face of adversity or hardship. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that they all live on the margins of society (hence the setting). The name “Whitey” is normally a pejorative term, but their final reference to him is as a “pal” (124). Their camaraderie or companionship is in fact a minor victory over racism and intolerance. If this is the message, however, it is never made explicit. If this is a protest story, then, it is protest of a most subtle or understated kind!

“Coffee for the Road” (published *Modern African Stories* in 1964, and reprinted in *Staffrider* 6.3 (1986)) has gained a certain notoriety as a result of Ndebele’s treatment of it in his essay, “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary” (originally a keynote address at a conference in 1984). Ndebele uses the story to demonstrate the features (and the limitations) of what he calls the literature of the “spectacular”. Since the story is not as readily available as some of the others, a summary may be helpful.

An obviously well-to-do Indian woman and her two children are travelling through the Karroo. They have slept in the car for a few hours (there are no hotels which will accept them). The mother is exhausted. The daughter wants some coffee (the flask is empty), and the mother stops at a café. Ignoring the hatch where non-whites are served, she walks into the café and asks a white woman to refill her flask with coffee. When the woman verbally abuses her, the mother “snaps” and throws the flask at the woman. It strikes her on the forehead and draws blood. The Indian woman walks out, gets back in the car, and resumes her journey. Some miles down the road she is stopped at a police road-block and forced to turn back. The final words are those of her little girl, Zaida, who says, ““I wish we had some coffee”” (94).

⁶³ One might expect La Guma, as a professed Marxist, would come down on the side of Chinaboy. The story, however, seems to cut across this kind of economic determinism. According to Trump, the story “seems to imply that there is a kind of dialectic between the poles of economic determinism and individualistic choice” (“Socialistic Explorations” 39).

According to Ndebele, the appeal of this kind of writing (for a black audience) lies “in the reader’s recognition of the spectacular rendering of a familiar oppressive reality” (*Rediscovery* 45). His analysis focuses on the “symbolic barrenness of the landscape” (*Rediscovery* 41), on the description of the white woman in the café, on the Indian woman’s “heroic” response (*Rediscovery* 42) and on the way nothing is left to the imagination. Here, as a sample of what Ndebele means by “spectacular representation”, is the description of the white woman in the café.

She had a round-shouldered, thick body and reddish-complexioned face that looked as if it had been sand-blasted into its component parts: hard plains of cheeks and nobbly cheek-bones and a bony ridge of nose that separated twin pools of dull grey; and the mouth a bitter gash, cold and malevolent as a lizard’s, a dry chapped and serrated pink crack. (90)

She is, as Ndebele suggests, “every inch the female ogre” (*Rediscovery* 42). Here is her vicious response to the request for coffee:

The crack opened and a screech came from it, harsh as the sound of metal rubbed against stone. “Coffee? My Lord Jesus Christ!” the voice screeched. “A bedamned *coolie* girl in here!” The eyes started in horror at the brown, tired, handsome Indian face with its smart sunglasses, and the city cut of the tan suit. “Coolies, Kaffirs and Hottentots outside,” she screamed. “Don’t you bloody well know? And you talk *English*, too, hey!” (90)

This reveals the spectacular ugliness of the South African situation. The Indian woman’s dignity and “handsome face” are in stark contrast to the virago she is confronted with, the very embodiment of the malevolence and cruelty of racism. Ndebele concludes, “Everything in La Guma’s story points to spectacle Where is causality? Such questions are irrelevant. Subtlety is avoided. . . . What is deeply etched in our minds is the spectacular contest between the powerless and the powerful” (*Rediscovery* 43).

One must immediately concede that Ndebele’s reading of this story is quite justified. Like “The Lemon Orchard”, it demonstrates what Abrahams calls “the cruel heartlessness of South African white society” (37). Clearly, demonstrating something as self-evident as this does not present a particularly interesting challenge, either for the writer or for the reader. The story apparently has a basis in fact.⁶⁴ What one must take issue with is not Ndebele’s reading

⁶⁴ See Abrahams, 33, 37. For readers of La Guma, part of the interest of “Coffee for the Road” lies in the ways in which it might anticipate his last novel, *Time of the Butcherbird*. The unnamed bird referred to in the story may well be a butcherbird. The Karoo setting of the story derives in part at least from La Guma’s experience of an enforced stay in Beaufort West. A bus carrying him and sixty other delegates to the Congress of the People

of the story, but the larger claim that it is typical of La Guma's work or the work of his contemporaries. The central plank of Ndebele's argument is that in the late 1950s, or after Sharpeville, "we see the emergence of what has been called Protest Literature" – writing which is designed to reveal "the spectacular ugliness of the South African situation in all its forms" (*Rediscovery* 40). According to Ndebele, "The bulk of the stories of James Matthews, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Alex la Guma, Can Themba, Webster Makaza, and others falls into this category" (*Rediscovery* 40). While this may be true in exceptional cases (such as "Coffee for the Road"), this claim – as a general statement – does not stand up to scrutiny. The discussion in the previous chapter of the *Drum* writers, and in this chapter of the District Six writers, will (I hope) have demonstrated the variety of this writing, and the difficulty of simply applying a blanket term ("Protest Literature") to it. Some stories do seem designed to protest against a manifestly unjust situation, but even then, their protest is seldom blatant or strident. These stories rely to a considerable extent on the reader's powers of inference, much is often left unstated, and they do often represent what Ndebele calls "interiority". Stimulating and valuable as Ndebele's essays are, one must agree with Field that, as least as far as La Guma is concerned, his comments do not constitute "a serious assessment of [his] fiction" (129). Ndebele uses this (rather uncharacteristic) story by La Guma to build an interesting and provocative case – and, in the process, perhaps, to prepare the ground for the reception of his own stories.⁶⁵ If one wants to find examples of the literature of the "spectacular", one must turn, not to the writers of the 1950s or early 1960s, but to the very different writers of the 1970s.

Any serious assessment of La Guma's fiction would have to consider the extent to which his ideological commitments and his identification with the working-class are reflected in his writings. To do this, however, one would have to turn to the series of novels he wrote, beginning with *A Walk in the Night* – but this lies outside of the scope of the present study. On the evidence of his short fiction, it would be hard to infer that La Guma was a leading figure in the resistance politics of the time, or that he was committed to anything other than the non-racial and democratic ideals that are central to the liberal tradition of post-Enlightenment Western thought. The ideology and practice of apartheid so flagrantly violated elementary human rights and democratic norms, that the protest writer often needed to do no more than invoke or assume or imply or refer to these rights and norms. On the evidence of their short fiction, then, Rive, Matthews and La Guma implicitly appeal to norms and values

(held at Kliptown in 1955) was stopped by the police, and they were kept there for the duration of the event (*Liberation Chabalala* ix).

⁶⁵ Field suggests that Ndebele chose "Coffee for the Road" because it enabled him to problematise earlier writing and justify his own position" (129).

that are central to the western, humanist tradition.⁶⁶ These values were also, of course, a central feature in the discourse of the liberation movement in the 1950s.

“THE *QUARTET* GROUP”

It is at least possible to refer to the *Drum* writers collectively, as if they had something in common; it is possible to speak (as Nkosi does) of a *Drum* ethos or lifestyle. Is this true of the District Six writers – and how close was their connection with the *Drum* writers?

In his interview with De Vries (a few weeks before his death) Rive says that being a *Drum* writer meant “two different things, according to whether one was in Cape Town or Johannesburg. They were a thousand miles apart, and *Drum* was essentially Johannesburg” (“Interview” 45). The picture that emerges is of two distinct groups of writers who were aware of each other’s work (here Rive and Mphahlele were key figures). Rive describes the *Drum* writers as “a fairly strong group of writers” (headed by Mphahlele), whereas “in the Cape there were three or four of us only” (“Interview” 45). He refers to these writers as “the *Quartet* group” – suggesting perhaps that it was largely this initiative that brought them together. Unlike the *Drum* writers, they did not publish in the same magazine or share the same workspace. Their association arose from personal contact with each other (facilitated in part by Barney Desai during his time as Cape Town editor of the *Post*). According to Rive, “the stories in *Quartet* were a result of our all sitting together” and reading each others’ stories (“Interview” 45). These writers shared a common cultural reference point (District Six), but, as with the *Drum* writers, there were significant differences in outlook, class, politics or lifestyle. In the Rive’s case, his affiliation with *Contrast* and with the Jack Cope/Uys Krige writers’ group was probably a more important influence on his work than his association with his fellow District Six writers (Matthews and La Guma).

In her tribute to Rive, Gordimer also refers to the distance which separated the *Drum* and the District Six writers, but argues that they shared a bond as participants in what she calls “a counter culture” (“Gordimer on murdered South African writer” 25). Gordimer writes with something like envy of the Cope/Krige group:

Richard belonged to the Cape, some of whose writers shared a sort of literary life together that didn’t exist in Johannesburg. . . Richard was central to a group of white writer friends who were closely caught up in each other’s lives . . . They tended not to live like the rest of us within the attrition and distraction

⁶⁶ Humanism is not, of course, exclusive to Western thought, but what is distinctive about its Western variant is the stress that it places on the individual. I explore this more fully in an article published in 2004 (“Welcome to the World of our Humanity”).

of city life . . . but in beach cottages and even formed a sort of colony along the coast. (“Murdered Writer” 25).

According to her, “Richard [although born in District Six] loved middle class comfort . . . and took unashamed if not defiant pleasure in getting physically away as far as possible from the ghetto” (“Murdered Writer” 25). The contrast with La Guma’s commitment to the Communist Party, or with Matthews’s deliberate identification with the ghetto (and subsequent embrace of Black Consciousness) could hardly be greater.

Clearly generalisations on the grounds of colour or place of origin (District Six) have limited value. What distinguishes the District Six writers from each other is at least as important as what they have in common. Like the *Drum* writers, they sought to resist the intrusions of the apartheid state on their personal or writing lives. Like the *Drum* writers, they fashioned an identity and lifestyle that flew in the face of the prohibitions of apartheid. The culture of both Sophiatown and District Six was a hybrid or creolised product that drew inspiration from American (in particular African-American) popular culture - as mediated through music and cinema and literature. Both the *Drum* and the District Six writers were aware that it was through their work that the black experience of modernity and urbanity enters into the fractured field of South African culture and letters.

In a seminal essay Rive discusses the dissonance created by his experience of place and community and his early exposure to the classics of English literature:

My family occupied a flat in a tenement on Caledon Street. My close friends were street urchins and ragamuffins, most of whom were illiterate. We ran around barefooted with patched trousers screaming abuse at anyone who dared to challenge our position. This was an environment totally removed from the gentle playfulness of Mrs Gaskell or the subtle ironies of Jane Austen. . . . I was accepting a culture by proxy.

“On Being a Black Writer in South Africa” 21)

When he takes down Langston Hughes’s *The Ways of White Folks* from the shelf of his local library, “a new world open[s] up” (21).⁶⁷ He discovers that the creation of literature is not “a white preserve”, and begins to write his own stories. In so doing, he places not only his own experience, but that of his community, on record. Alex la Guma tells an analogous story. He discovers, from his reading of South African literature, that “nothing satisfactory or worthwhile” had been written about “the area from which [he] sprang” (District Six): “So I

⁶⁷ The moment is analogous to Peter Abrahams’s discovery of the work of the African American writers in the Bantu Men’s Social Centre in Johannesburg. When he enters the BMSC he hears the voice of Paul Robeson singing “Old Man River”. He finds the library and takes down a copy of Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (*Tell Freedom* 190-192).

think there was a conscious effort on my part to place on record the life in the poor areas, working class areas, and perhaps for that reason most of my work is centred around that community and that life” (“The Real Picture” 19). He goes on to refer to his function “as a historian of the people” (21). Mphahlele, for his part, is doing something very similar in the “Lesane” stories that he wrote for *Drum*: his focus, he says, was always “the drama of life as lived in the ghetto” (*Afrika My Music* 14-15).

There are also some obvious differences between these two groups of writers. While the *Drum* writers leaned towards a popular literature whose primary purpose was to entertain, and whose stock characters were the gangster or *tsotsi*, the detective, the good-time girl and the shebeen queen, the District Six writers did (at times) write what could be described as “protest” stories. If, as Cornwell suggests, the writing of Rive, Matthews and La Guma is “consistently the more forthright and uncompromising of the 1950s generation” (“Protest in Fiction” 9), then this may be attributed in part to the uneasy, ambivalent, in-between position they occupied in South African racial hierarchy. Racial legislation – in particular the Population Registration Act, the Mixed Marriages Act, and the Group Areas Act – impacted on members of this group in a particularly intimate and immediate way. In no other group of writers do we find such acute sensitivity to racial signifiers, and no other writers have to negotiate such a conflicted subject position. However they sought to position themselves ideologically, these are the issues that help to define the work of this group of writers.⁶⁸ According to La Guma, “the black writer . . . has to reflect the racial problems in South Africa. Being first of all a black writer, he is going to protest against racism. And from protest he can also demand change” (“The Real Picture” 21). It is not surprising, then, that it is in the work of these writers that the impulse to protest finds its clearest expression. At the same time, however, it would be simplistic or reductive to simply refer to them as “protest writers”.

⁶⁸ In a salutary article that swims against the tide of La Guma criticism, Adhikari argues (in an article on *Walk in the Night*) that La Guma was very aware of the “complexities and of the ambiguities inherent to coloured identity The intricacies of the private politics of race and identity prevalent within the coloured community are . . . clearly evident in the pages of this volume” (43).

CHAPTER 6: POST-SHARPEVILLE

Any hope for non-violent change in South Africa was brought to a sudden and shocking end by the shooting of 69 unarmed civilians at Sharpeville on 21 March 1960. The Sharpeville massacre marked the end of the era of peaceful protest, carried out largely within the law, by political organisations representing the disenfranchised black population. It was followed by the declaration of a state of emergency, the banning of the PAC and the ANC, and the detention of their leaders and many of their supporters. The Sharpeville shootings were condemned at the United Nations, where there were calls to impose sanctions, and the flight of capital from South African resulted in the imposition of currency controls. This was the point of no return: the liberation movements embarked on a course of sabotage (leading eventually to armed struggle); the state responded by in effect suspending the rule of law and establishing the apparatus of a repressive police state.

Looking back, with the benefit of hindsight, it is perhaps difficult to understand the feeling of optimism that accompanied the protest actions and the politics of non-racial struggle in the 1950s. This was, after all, the decade when all the major pieces of apartheid legislation were systematically put in place, when the National Party continued to build its support base among the white population, and when it showed its determination to take whatever measures were necessary to curb mass-based protest. In 1956, 156 members of the Congress Alliance were arrested and put on trial on charges of treason (arising out of their role in organising the Congress of the People at Kliptown in 1955, at which the Freedom Charter was adopted). Accused No. 1 was Nelson Mandela. Had they been found guilty, they would have faced the death penalty. In spite of all this, mood of the 1950s was anything but despondent or defeatist. Nkosi sums this up:

It was a time of infinite hope and possibility; it seemed not extravagant in the least to predict then that the Nationalist Government would soon collapse, if not from the pressure of the extra-parliamentary opposition, certainly from the growing volume of unacceptable laws. It was a time when people of all races – though the bulk came from the black community – joined together in a massive Defiance Campaign conducted along Gandian lines, which resulted in hundreds of arrests, but managed, in its own way, to frighten the Government out of its wits. It was a time which saw the birth of Alan Paton's Liberal Party dedicated to non-racial policies and individual freedom. For the ANC,

PAC and Congress of Democrats it was the finest hour. It was a time of mass student rallies at the universities, the storming of prison barricades by students demanding the release of political leaders; and in the avenues leading to the Universities of Johannesburg and Cape Town there were mile-long marches in favour of more academic freedom at a time when the Government was threatening to bar coloured students from all “open” universities. It was a time of thrust, never of withdrawal. *(Home and Exile 16)*

This energy and vitality spilled over into the *Drum* newsroom and into the pages of *Drum*. It found artistic expression in the staging of the jazz opera *King Kong* by members of the Union of South African Artists. The production toured overseas, and helped to make the international reputations of singers and musicians such as Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela. “Johannesburg seemed at the time to be on the verge of creating a new and exciting Bohemia” (Nkosi, *Home and Exile 17*).

After Sharpeville, most of the *Drum* writers went into exile, and some died premature deaths (Nat Nakasa committed suicide in New York in 1965; Can Themba died in Swaziland in 1968). *Drum* stopped publishing short stories not long after Mphahlele’s departure in 1957. In spite of this, black writers continued to find publication outlets for their work, often in left-wing journals or magazines like *Fighting Talk*, *New Age*, *Africa South*, and *The New African*. Some went on to publish short stories in literary magazines like *Transition* (based in East Africa) and *Black Orpheus* (based in Nigeria), or in *The Classic*, founded in South Africa by Nat Nakasa in 1963. The editor of *Black Orpheus*, Ulli Beier, helped to foster the work of black South African writers; he smuggled the manuscript of La Guma’s *A Walk in the Night* out of the country and saw to its publication by Mbari in 1962.

How significant were these various outlets in keeping alive the short story tradition? Lindfors has advanced the rather remarkable claim that “collectively, these [liberal and communist publications] were as influential as *Drum* in shaping the African short story” (“Postwar Literature in English” 53). Linked to this is the claim that they were looking for contributions “flavoured with social criticism or political protest” (53). If one looks a little more closely at the evidence, this argument seems unconvincing. These publications did accept (and sometimes encourage the submission of) short stories, but these were relatively small in number, scattered across a handful of publications, and appealed to a rather disparate audience. It seems very unlikely that their collective impact could have approached that of *Drum*. Lindfors himself points out that in 1957 (its peak year), *Drum* attracted entries from

no fewer than 1638 writers from across the African continent. Lindfors bases his case in part on *New Age*: for four years (from 1955 to 1958) it sponsored short story competitions which, he says, “attracted the sort of stories *Drum* would not have dared to print” (53).¹ One of La Guma’s earliest short stories, “Nocturne” was entered into a competition advertised by *New Age*, and published (under the title “Etude”) on 24 January 1957. However, the advertisement for the initial competition does not call for overtly political short stories, or even for stories that register a “protest” of some kind; in fact, as we have seen (see page 167), the guidelines read rather like a classic realist manifesto. Many of the *Drum* writers would have responded with alacrity to the injunction to “Let Life Be Your Inspiration” (*New Age* 2 June 1955: 8). La Guma’s story would probably have been accepted by any South African magazine or journal with an interest in publishing short stories. It would be difficult to infer from the story that its author was a leading member of SACPO and the Communist Party, and the story itself is not overtly political.

The example of Alfred Hutchinson suggests that fairly conventional literary criteria were in fact applied by the judges of the *New Age* competitions. Hutchinson is best known for his autobiography, *Road to Ghana* (1960). Like most of the writers of the 1950s, Hutchinson went into exile and wrote an autobiography (in his case, from Ghana). Like several of the *Drum* writers, he attended St. Peters, and like Can Themba, he graduated from Fort Hare. He participated in the Defiance Campaign, became an ANC office bearer, was co-opted onto its national executive committee, and (like La Guma) was one of the 156 Treason Triallists. His story “Washerwoman Annie”, published in *New Age* (6 October 1955), is the fictional life story of Ma Dlomo (the washerwoman of the title). The circumstances of her life in a shantytown are sketched in the customary detail:

The scales of familiarity seemed to drop from Ma Dlomo’s eyes. She saw the squalor as if she was seeing it for the first time: the dirty runnels that served as drains; the tumble-down latrines; the many dogs snuffling at the dustbins; the dirty children . . . saw the settlement of hovels like a heap of broken upturned shoes.

(6)

¹ In contrast to *Drum*, the *New Age* short story competitions attracted some 30 to 40 entries (including, sometimes, more than one entry from particular writers).

This kind of description (pioneered among others by Abrahams and Mphahlele) is a generic feature of 1950s writing, and confirms yet again the realist conventions and references that underpin the writing. Ma Dlomo looks after her daughter and two grandchildren, and makes a living by taking in washing. (Ma Dlomo-like figures abound in the Mphahlele's own writing, based in part on his own family experience.) In spite of her poverty, Ma-Dlomo is able to empathise with others. Her neighbour, Ma Tadi, had been marched off to the police station that morning with a four-gallon tin of illegally brewed beer on her head. As she watches her, Ma Dlomo feels the pang of an old grief: "She had lost three children to the poverty and squalor of the shacks. Tandi, her last child, lived on like a flickering lantern in a gale" (6). As with Mphahlele, hardship is something to be endured stoically; in both cases, there is an implied protest at unjust and oppressive conditions. As she bends over the washing tub Ma Dlomo recalls her childhood in Zululand, her education (cut short by the death of her father from phthisis), her dreams of making a life together with her husband in Johannesburg, and the inevitable disillusionment that followed. Her story becomes a representative case-history, punctuated by the refrain, "'It's heavy'" (6). After twenty-five years of struggle, she finds herself back where she started. She decides to ask Mrs Field, the "missis" whose washing she has done for ten years, for a five-shilling raise. In her employer's eyes, of course, she is simply "Washerwoman Annie", a stereotypical figure. Her appeal – expressed in broken English – is refused. Our awareness of Ma-Dlomo's life history and situation is juxtaposed with Mrs Field's uncaring incomprehension: "'You Native girls are all the same. . . . How dare you talk like this to me?'" (7). Implicit in the story is an indictment of Ma-Dlomo's exploitation, and of the whole system of racial capitalism which makes this possible. Hutchinson's story does not, however, differ significantly from other stories written during this period, some of which also protest (if only by implication) against an obviously unjust and exploitative system.

The adjudicators' comments, appended to the story, are of interest.² They commend the writer for his "good style" and "fine images" which are "natural and true to character, and to the situation" (7). They remark on the writer's "powers of observation" and "ability to create a situation of genuine poignancy", and conclude that "this is real imaginative writing". They criticize the story for what they say are

² The adjudicators were Jack Cope (editor of *Contrast*), Uys Krige (well-known Afrikaans writer) and Richard van der Ross (an educationist, and later Rector of the University of the Western Cape).

flaws in its construction and in the presentation of the character of Mrs Field. They find too many “distractions”; as a result Ma Dlomo “remains more of a symbol than a vividly seen and realised person” (7). The extensive flashbacks “slow down the narrative” (7). They admit, however, that the writer is tackling “a big and serious task” and feel that he should be commended. The adjudicators are in fact applying the familiar criteria of mainstream formalist or realist criticism to this story. There is no evidence that they are primarily interested in the story’s efficacy as protest: the implication (one that Alan Paton, for example, would have endorsed) is that the story must first of all succeed as a story. They single out the treatment of Mrs Field and comment on the implausibility of her apparent transformation into “an inhuman person” (7).

The adjudicators’ criticism is somewhat incongruous, given the context created by the publication itself. *New Age* was a left-wing newspaper sympathetic to the black trade union movement and to the Congress alliance. “Washerwoman Annie” continues on page 7, where the headline story features demands to be put to a Wage Board by the Garment Workers’ Union (“Garment Workers will succeed only if ALL STAND UNITED”). In the centre of the page is a picture of workers taking part in the Evaton bus boycott, and the “militant spirit of the workers” is praised. To the right is a report on a message of solidarity to be delivered by Dr Naiker to the forthcoming ANC conference in Durban. There is an evident disjuncture between the ethos of the adjudicators, who judge the story according to intrinsic “literary” criteria, and the context of political struggle created by the surrounding reports. “Washerwoman Annie” displays empathy for the plight of Ma Dlomo (and others like her) but it does not propose (even implicitly) working class solidarity or political activism as a solution. There may be signs of incipient political consciousness in Ma Dlomo’s recognition of her situation, but all she can offer is continued endurance and stoicism. There seems to be no escape from the “poverty that [sits] on her like a yoke” ((6), or from a life of toil and drudgery. In its realistic depiction of social conditions and its empathetic treatment of Ma Dlomo, Hutchinson’s story resembles much of the fiction published in *Drum* during the 1950s. In particular, its narrative style and even at times its diction are reminiscent of Mphahlele’s “Lesane” stories.³

³ *New Age* can claim to have discovered Hutchinson as a short story writer; they certainly encouraged his literary aspirations. In addition to “Washerwoman Annie”, they published “Lizzie’s Sin” (6 December 1956) and “The Chief” (9 May 1957), and they awarded first prize in their 1958 short story competition to “High Wind in the Valley” (25 December 1958). According to the judges (Harry

This brief case study suggests that there was no direct, simple, one-to-one relationship between the political orientation of a left-wing paper like *New Age* and the kind of short fiction it chose to publish. The same criteria are, for example, evident in the judges' comments on the story which won first prize in the first *New Age* short story competition, "The New Pipe" by D.A. Leonard (*New Age* 15 September 1955: 6-7) The story, which is politically innocuous, has some obvious faults in terms of structure and technique, and these are singled out for comment. The adjudicators' describe the competition as an "eye-opener", but comment on the lack of literary expertise on the part of most of the entrants: "We should say at once that most of the entries must really be regarded as the raw material of literature; they lack the craftsmanship, the polish and the complete command of language that go into the art of writing" (8). They recommend "with the greatest emphasis" that aspirant writers should "study ceaselessly the masters of the short story" (8). There is no attempt to apply anything other than what were at the time (at least in the English-speaking world) widely accepted literary criteria. Storytelling is an art, and the aspirant writer must work hard to master its formal aspects. There is no expectation that the stories should register some kind of protest or reflect a particular political position. If an ideological position is implied in the judges' comments, it is simply that of a non-racial humanism: "A feature of the entries was the remarkable interflow of sympathy and understanding between the various racial groups in South Africa" (8).

At the same time as Rive was submitting stories to *Drum*, he also entered "Dagga Smoker's Dream" in the first *New Age* short story competition. The story was awarded second prize, and in this case the judges comment appreciatively on the story's strengths. They praise the story for its "vivid" characterisation and the "economy" and "tension" of the writing, and single out its "stark and uncompromising realism" (*New Age* 22 September 1955: 6). When Rive republished the story in *Advance, Retreat* in 1983, he seems to have taken cognisance of their criticisms of its

Bloom, and (again) Uys Krige and Richard van der Ross) his story captures "the crisis and turmoil of a group of people [in this case, "coloured" people] torn away from their land and homes by the Group Areas Act" (4). The story represents the politics of SACPO (referred to as "the Coloured organization") in a favourable light, and questions the motives and understanding of those who seek to promote an exclusive "colouredness". One suspects that the congruence between Hutchinson's politics and those of *New Age* may have influenced their decision to promote his writing in their pages. His political sympathies are clearly evident in "The Chief" (the chief in question has been served with an order banishing him from his tribal area) and in "High Wind in the Valley".

structure, and the result is a more unified and coherent story.⁴ Rive's recourse to such apparently contrasting publications as *Drum* and *New Age* suggests that the criteria for selection employed by these publications did not differ as much as Lindfors suggests.

The story which won third prize, "Future Full of Darkness" by Zubeida Sallee (a seventeen-year-old schoolgirl using the pseudonym "Sharon Davis") could have been lifted straight from the pages of *Drum* (*New Age* 29 September 1955: 6-7). Its exploitation of the popular romance mode is reminiscent of Can Themba's "Forbidden Love" or "Passionate Stranger"; its central theme is the confusion caused when its young protagonist falls in love for the first time, only to discover that the man, one Max Brandon, is in fact a "European".

It is nevertheless true that some of the stories to be found in publications such as *Fighting Talk* are little more than thinly fictionalised sketches of the humiliation or misery inflicted by the apartheid system. The intent is clearly to protest against inhumane conditions and treatment. Hutchinson's story "No Pass . . ." (*Fighting Talk*, October 1956) is one example. The plight of the protagonist, Amos Zwane, is represented in such stark outline that he hardly emerges as a distinct individual. He is simply a man (potentially any man) who has lost his job, whose 72-hour pass has expired, and who faces relocation to the rural "homeland". The man whom he has paid to "fix" his pass has disappeared with his money; at the end of the story Amos is re-arrested and finds himself handcuffed in a line of prisoners. He experiences pain, fear and helplessness. His wife, at one point, asks, "'Can't you do something?'" (7). He is simply a helpless victim. The line of handcuffed prisoners resembles that described in "Washerwoman Annie", and the "old woman with a bundle of washing on her head" who stops, shakes her head, and sighs, could be Ma Dlomo herself. The story could have been written as a counterpart to "Washerwoman Annie": each reveals the servitude, exploitation and impotence which were the lot of blacks. It is less nuanced in its presentation, however, and does not show that same attention to detail and situation. In fact, on the evidence of this story alone, it would be difficult to identify the author. In this respect it resembles a number of stories published in the

⁴ In particular, Rive responds to the criticism that "a serious weakness is the almost complete failure to exploit the motif suggested by the girl Honey" ("Adjudicators' Note" 6). Instead of allowing her to "fade out" after the initial paragraphs, the later version of the story has Karel, in his dagga-induced stupor, confusing her with the coloured girl in the carriage whom he attempts to proposition. Rive also seems to have heeded the judges' comments on the ending: in the revised version the somewhat confusing reference to "Kaffers" who ride second-class is omitted.

alternative press, whose plots seem to have been in effect dictated by the apartheid system itself.

The same number of *Fighting Talk* prints what Lindfors regards as a short story by Alex la Guma, entitled “The Machine”. The “machine” in question is the apartheid machine, and the central protagonist, an unnamed official, is no more than a cog in the machine: “He is unemotional, expressionless, a robot, part of the vast machinery created to enslave a people” (8). There is no exploration of interiority: the suggestion is that this nameless official feels nothing and thinks nothing. His interactions with the black people he deals with are utterly impersonal. Ironically, he has himself been reduced to a machine: “The machine has no feeling for human life, flesh, blood, tired muscles The machine must administer a law, it must perform a function” (8). The story seems to leave nothing to the imagination; everything is spelt out; no one is granted any subjectivity or individuality; the commentary of the narrator dominates the story. Cornwell, understandably, questions whether this is in fact a fictional story at all, and treats it as a journalistic report.⁵ Its factuality, its referentiality,⁶ its explicitness, its indifference to individual psychology or situation, are characteristic of the impersonal journalistic report, grounded in factual observation of an existing real-world situation. Yet the title and central trope (“The Machine”) reveals that the story is in fact grounded in an imaginative insight: what it explores is precisely the lack of personality or thought or conscience in the unnamed apartheid functionary who in effect becomes little more than a rubber stamp. This dehumanisation is the real subject of the story: “Beyond the counter he sees a row of women with dark faces. Does he think of them as women? Are they human? Does he hate them?” (8). The same questions could be asked of the functionaries in Nazi Germany who helped to facilitate the holocaust, or of those in Stalin’s Russia who administered the Gulag. The story, rather paradoxically, operates at a level which raises it above mere reportage: it explores the problem of human accountability, and

⁵ The story, he says, “is actually a particularly enterprising piece of journalism, typical of the creative reportage appearing in the leftist press in the late 50s” (“Protest in Fiction” 2). In the course of a detailed analysis, he does concede that the “careful evocation of atmosphere” in the opening sentences is “suggestive of literary design”, and that by exploiting “the multiple semantic ambiguities of the present tense, La Guma is able to make use of some of the techniques of fiction. . . .” (93, 94). He insists, however, that the “presented world is . . . identical with the real world”, and that the questions raised about the robot-like functionary “presuppose an existent reality independent of the immediate context” (6). It is on this last point that my own reading of the story departs from Cornwell’s.

⁶ Cornwell establishes, for example, that the address given in the story (27 Rutger Street, Cape Town) was indeed the address of the Native Female Registration offices in October, 1956, when “The Machine” was published (93).

asks how an inhuman system is able to operate with apparent success. It is obviously designed to protest against this inhuman system – but at the same time it could be read as an almost allegorical exploration of one aspect of “the human condition”. It is not in fact limited in its application to the particular circumstances of an apartheid-era pass office.

Arthur Maimane provides an interesting example of the career of a *Drum* writer post-1958 (Maimane left the country in 1958, allegedly in fear of his life). His *Drum* stories were, one suspects, written largely tongue-in-cheek, or as a deliberate exercise in a particular genre. Between January and December 1953 he turned out (with what Chapman describes as “nonchalant disdain”) a series of short stories under the pseudonym “Arthur Mogale”, featuring the exploits of an American-style private detective, Chester O. Morena. In spite of the American diction and style, Maimane’s detective may, Chapman suggests, have as one of his antecedents, the trickster-figure of African folk tradition (“*Drum* and its Significance” 206). This is how Morena introduces himself:

Me, I’m smart. I know all the angles. I’ve been plenty places. They kicked me out of university during my second year, and my father kicked me out of the family. I became a gangster, pick-pocket, robber and all-round crook. But I played it scientifically. Still, after a few years I decided the old saying ‘crime doesn’t pay’ was correct. I joined the police force in Pretoria, where I wasn’t known.
 (“Crime for Sale” 24)

The detective serials in *Drum*, were, as Lindfors points out, “self-consciously, even boastfully, derivative”, and the private detective is “patterned on an American stereotype” (“Postwar Literature in English” (56)). What happens when this popular outlet (*Drum* magazine) is removed, and with it the temptation to write what Lindfors calls “potboilers” (57)? Maimane begins to write protest-style stories under his own name, employing themes and situations generated by apartheid. “Just a Tsotsi”, published in *Africa South* in 1958, takes a situation somewhat reminiscent of Sentso’s “Under the Bluegum Trees” and examines the intersecting lives of two boys, one white, one black, who grew up as playmates on a farm. They make a pact that they will be blood-brothers. Ten years later Piet witnesses the shooting of “Klaasie”, who

has been arrested in a pass raid and attempts to escape. The story relies extensively on dialogue, and illustrates a familiar South African theme.

“Hungry Boy”, published in *Fighting Talk* in 1960, draws on subject matter which Themba had earlier (and more skilfully) explored in “The Urchin”. Here the young boy has been abandoned by his parents, and resorts to a life of petty thieving and benzine-sniffing. The story demonstrates a continuing fascination with the tsotsi-figure and with the socio-economic causation of crime. In both stories, there is an (implied) protest at the circumstances which lead to the waste of human potential.

“The Homecoming” (*Fighting Talk*) – like Hutchinson’s “No Pass” – dramatises the effects of the pass laws. Here the (unnamed) victim has outlived his usefulness as a farm labourer, and is returned to the township, destitute, desperate, and barely able to walk. He has been on the farm for seventeen months; all he needs is seven pence to get him by train to Orlando. Almost inevitably a policeman appears and demands his pass (which of course he doesn’t have): “ ‘Come on *jong, Kaffer, staan op!*” The terse command illustrates the way in which he (and countless others) are interpellated as inferior, worthless black subjects. The protagonist is never named; in his anonymity he represents any of the innumerable victims of racial oppression. Like Hutchinson’s pass-law victim or washerwoman, he is an everyman (or everywoman) figure. In these stories policemen are invariably brutal and inhuman, and the system is uniformly oppressive.

“Kaffir Woman”, also by Maimane, published in the Nigerian literary magazine *Black Orpheus* in 1963, is a longer, more extended treatment of another familiar apartheid-era subject, sex across the colour line.⁷ The story tells of Gert Fourie’s lust for Maggie, the “kaffir *meid*” whose partner, “Swart Jerry”, is one of his farm workers. When he is discovered by his wife, rather than face disgrace and humiliation, he shoots himself. The narrative is relatively dispassionate, and offers some (fairly predictable insights) into Gert’s conflicted feelings. Rather improbably perhaps, instead of feeling used and abused, Maggie feels if anything empowered: she is no longer “an anonymous black woman, scurrying humbly around the farmhouse and yard like the other black women” (39).

⁷ Maimane left South Africa in 1958, allegedly in fear of his life after one of the gangs had put out a contract on his life: “I decided that I had stuck my neck out enough times for *Drum*” (quoted in Nicol 115-16). He worked for a few years as a radio journalist in Ghana, before moving to the United Kingdom. He was one of the few *Drum* journalists to survive the apartheid years, and returned to South Africa in 1990 to take up a position on *The Weekly Mail*. His novel *Victims* (1976) was revised and republished as *Hate No More* in 2000. It vividly recreates the Sophiatown world.

These stories deal with themes suggested by the exploitation and oppression of black people under apartheid, and do so in ways that are largely predictable. Black people are presented as helpless victims, or as stoical survivors. The staple themes are poverty, hardship, injustice, racism. Many of these stories could be described as “the literature of the powerless identifying the key factor responsible for their powerlessness” (Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* 46). They exhibit some of the features of “spectacular” representation – dramatic contrasts, instant meaning, an avoidance of subtlety. While interiority is not completely absent, its function is usually limited to demonstrating the victimhood of black people. It is, of course, entirely understandable that black writers should have resorted to this kind of writing. Boehmer comments: “Perhaps for obvious reasons the heat of apartheid caused writers to favour certain formal decisions over others, to adopt an upfront, hard-hitting, mimetic aesthetic” (“South African Fiction in Transition” 46). At times one is reminded of the terms of Nkosi’s dismissive judgement of black South African writing – that what we have is “a type of fiction which exploits the ready-made plots of racial violence, social apartheid, interracial love affairs which are doomed from the beginning” (*Home and Exile* 132). This does apply to some extent to some of the writing produced in the late 1950s or early 1960s for publications such as *Fighting Talk*. One can understand why a post-1990 novelist like Mda should say, looking back: “Now the author is dead, and the author was apartheid” (Naidoo, “Interview with Zakes Mda” 252). One can accept Lindfors’s view that in the more accomplished of these stories “the protest . . . is often implicit; the reader is presented with a vivid picture of injustice, oppression, cruelty or poverty and is left to draw his own conclusions”.⁸ It is, however, difficult to sustain the over-simple dichotomy which Lindfors creates between “the extravagant sensationalism” in *Drum* and the “angry protest in liberal publications” (“Postwar Literature in English” 59). Not all the stories in *Drum* were guilty of “extravagant sensationalism”; and the protest in stories in so-called “liberal publications”⁹ was often neither “angry” nor “blatant”.¹⁰ There are, in fact, obvious continuities between *Drum* writing, District Six writing, and the “protest writing” to which Lindfors refers.

⁸ Arguably, this form of protest is at its most effective in a work like La Guma’s *A Walk in the Night*, which amounts to a devastating indictment of the material, social and political circumstances which have impoverished the lives of the community depicted in the novella.

⁹ *New Age* would hardly have regarded itself as “liberal”.

¹⁰ One also needs to question the “new critical” assumptions (objectivity, balance, detachment) that Lindfors seem to take for granted.

THE CLASSIC

Lindfors's remarks do not apply to the writing published in *The Classic*, the first literary journal to be founded by (and primarily for) African writers. It represented an attempt on the part of its editor, Nat Nakasa, to set standards for black writing in this country, and it offered an opportunity to his former *Drum* colleagues to reassert presence on the literary scene – albeit from exile. “It will be the job of *The Classic* to seek African writing of merit,” declared Nakasa (“Comment” 4). The journal was conceived of by Nat Nakasa, Can Themba and others of the Sophiatown set in a shebeen called “The Classic” (situated behind The Classic Laundry in Johannesburg). Nadine Gordimer was one of the trustees, and worked closely with Nakasa on the production of the first two editions. Ironically, the journal was funded by the Farfield Foundation, later revealed to be a CIA front organisation.¹¹ Among the writers featured in the first two numbers were Mphahlele, Themba, Nkosi, Motsisi, Sehume and Nakasa himself. The second number included stories by Doris Lessing, Barney Simon, Dugmore Boetie and Casey Motisi, as well as an extract from Fugard's *People are Living There*. Barney Simon took over as editor after Nakasa's departure for the United States in 1964, and his comments give a valuable insight into the difficulties of editing such a journal, particularly in the mid-to-late sixties.¹² The contents of Volume 1, No 4 (1964) suggest that material was already hard to come by, and there is no sign of the publication of the prize-winning stories from the competition announced in the second number (the judges were to be Noni Jabavu, James Baldwin and William Plomer). This fourth number is padded out with interviews conducted by Nkosi with a number of African writers and critics (including Ulli Beier, editor of *Black Orpheus*, and Amos Tutuola).

In the first number of *The Classic* Nakasa argues for a non-racial approach to South African literature, and expresses the need to promote a “shared nationhood” and a common identity as South Africans: “Whatever their colour or views may be, [South African writers] must accept their presence in the country as members of one

¹¹ This was only revealed in the late 1960s. No one associated with *The Classic* had any idea that the money originated with the CIA, and the Foundation's local representative, Frank Platt, made no attempt to influence policy. Other (equally unwitting) beneficiaries were Richard Rive, the recipient of a travel grant from the Farfield Foundation (1962-1963), and Es'kia Mphahlele, who was Director of the CIA-funded Congress for Cultural Freedom in Paris in the early 1960s (and who helped secure the travel grant for Rive). The Farfield Trust rescued *Contrast* in the mid-1960s when a financial crisis threatened its survival. These details are gleaned from Jack Cope's article, “The World of Contrast” (18), Barney Simon's “My Years with *The Classic*” (75) and Rive's *Writing Black* (19).

¹² “For much of my editorship the right balance of contributions was hard to come by. They had to be scouted for, solicited, begged for, exorcised” (“My Years with *The Classic*” 79).

community, the South African community” (“Writing in South Africa” 190).¹³ Nakasa makes explicit the view of culture, nationhood and identity shared by the Sophiatown writers of the 1950s, and in passing he pays tribute to the “cultural moment” that they represented: “Sophiatown is the only place I know where African writers and aspirant writers ever lived in close proximity, almost as a community. . . . Before these men left, Sophiatown had a heart like Greenwich Village or Harlem” (188). His article – and the journal that he was largely responsible for founding – demonstrates that even after the hammer-blows of Sharpeville, the banning of the ANC and the PAC and the state of emergency, the non-racial ideal and the dream of a shared nationhood persisted.¹⁴

The “Sophiatown Renaissance” was brought to a premature end by a number of factors: by the destruction of Sophiatown itself; by the decision by Tom Hopkinson, who took over as editor of *Drum* at the beginning of 1958, to discontinue publishing short stories; and of course by the Sharpeville massacre and its aftermath. By 1963, when Nakasa brought out the first number of *The Classic*, the former *Drum* writers had gone into exile (with the exception of Casey Motsisi). Nakasa lists the exiles by name: Alfred Hutchinson, Arthur Maimane, Todd Matshikiza, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi and Bloke Modisane. Sole lists in addition the following writers who had gone into exile: Mazisi Kunene, Bessie Head, Arthur Nortje, Keorapetse Kgotsitsile, Cosmo Pieterse, Denis Brutus and Alex la Guma (“Class, Continuity and Change” 164). Mzamane points out that Sole’s list excludes Noni Jabavu (“the first significant African woman writer in English”), A.C. Jordan (author of the isiXhosa classic *Inqumbo Yeminyanya*), Jordan Ngubane, Same Guma, Daniel Kunene and Gideon Mangoale (“The Impact of Black Consciousness on Culture” 180). Mzamane also points to the exodus of singers, actors and musicians in the 1960s, many of whom were associated with the production of *King Kong* which toured overseas.

¹³ References are to the version reprinted in *The World of Nat Nakasa* edited by Essop Patel (1975). The title is taken from the special commemorative edition of *The Classic* published after Nakasa’s death by suicide in New York on 14 July 1965.

¹⁴ Given these beliefs, the encouragement that Nakasa received from a friend in New York (“Almost anything African sells like hot cakes here”) posed something of a problem for him: in his view white writers (like Nadine Gordimer) also qualified as African writers – but how would this be received in New York (193)?

CENSORSHIP AND BANNINGS

Other measures taken by the state in the course of the 1960s had the effect of further tightening the noose around those writers who remained inside the country. The importation of “indecent, objectionable or obscene” literature had been prohibited by the Customs Act of 1955, and the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950 had outlawed the publication of any “speech, utterance, writing or statement” by a listed communist.¹⁵ In 1963 the National Party government introduced South Africa’s first formal censorship law, the Publications and Entertainment Act of 1963. The stated purpose of the Act was to uphold a Christian view of life in South Africa, and six categories of undesirable material were identified. Included in the definition was any publication that was (i) “indecent or obscene or offensive or harmful to public morals”, or (ii) that was “blasphemous or offensive to the religious convictions or feelings of any section of the inhabitants of the Republic”, or (iii) that was “harmful to the relations between any inhabitants of the Republic”, or (iv) that was “prejudicial to the safety of the state” [my summary of the provisions cited by De Lange (8)]. A Directorate of Publications appointed the members of publications committees whose purpose was to evaluate material submitted to them.¹⁶ The Act was an important weapon in the state’s attempt to assert its hegemony by imposing some form of ideological control over its citizens. Under the Act, nearly 9000 publications were banned. Somewhat paradoxically, De Lange argues that the effect of the Act was felt primarily by white writers: “There were so many other repressive measures that were used against black writers that hardly any of their work reached the status of publication” (129). This study demonstrates that in spite of these measures black literature in English did in fact flourish in the 1950s – at least as far as the short story is concerned. The *Drum* writers and the District Six writers were able to take advantage of the opportunities offered by a range of publications, including the alternative press (*New Age*, *Fighting Talk*), popular magazines (*Drum*), political magazines (*Africa South*) and literary journals (*Contrast*, *The Classic*). These opportunities were drastically curtailed by the introduction of the 1963 Act, as a result

¹⁵ As a result of this the work of La Guma and Brutus could not be printed or distributed inside South Africa. This meant that the manuscript of *A Walk in the Night* had to be smuggled out of the country, and that when *Quartet* was published in 1963 it could not be sold or distributed inside South Africa (La Guma was one of the contributors).

¹⁶ Details of this Act and its subsequent amendments are provided by De Lange in *The Muzzled Muse*, her study of the effects of censorship on literature in South Africa (8-9).

of which many editors would only consider publishing politically innocuous stories.¹⁷ In addition, many of the radical, left-wing publications were banned in the post-Sharpeville climate. Together with other measures of the increasingly repressive state, this had the effect of almost completely closing down the space that had been available to the writers of the *Drum* generation.

Perhaps the most drastic and far-reaching of these additional measures was the listing of forty-six black South Africans (all of whom had left the country) in terms of the amended Suppression of Communism Act in an extraordinary Government Gazette of 1 April 1966. Included in the list were the following black writers, all of whom had gone into exile: Mazisi Kunene, Bloke Modisane, Lewis Nkosi, Todd Matshikiza, Es'kia Mphahlele and Can Themba.¹⁸ From this date, all of their work was in effect banned in South Africa. A whole generation of black writers had been silenced. In Rive's words, "South African writing in English virtually became white by law" ("Books by Black Writers" 14). Nadine Gordimer was one of the few white South African writers to register the import of this measure, and to protest against it.¹⁹ In an article which first appeared in *The Rand Daily Mail* (and was then published in *Contrast*), she writes: "All of [these writers] . . . offer a first-hand account of the life that is lived out of sight of the white suburbs, and the thoughts that lie unspoken behind dark faces. . . . These autobiographies, novels, stories, essays and poems are the place to find the inner world where men learn the things worth knowing about each other" ("How Not to Know the African" 47).²⁰ The result, she says, is "the virtual extinction of Black and Coloured South African writers" ("How Not to Know the African" 49). The effect of these various measures is summed up by Lindfors: "By censoring literature from abroad, by exterminating liberal and radical publications, by blacklisting, intimidating and imprisoning writers deemed politically dangerous, the government has gradually choked off protest writing in South Africa" ("Post-War

¹⁷ Lindfors notes that since 1963, to be on the safe side, *Drum* "has published only staff-written detective serials in which the detective's adventures take place in mythical lands and among peculiar peoples who cannot be mistaken for inhabitants of South Africa" ("Popular Literature in English" 62).

¹⁸ In addition, since 1962 the work of Alex la Guma and Dennis Brutus had been unavailable in South Africa as a result of personal banning orders served on them.

¹⁹ Visser notes that he could find no trace of protest against this measure from "white academic circles" in South Africa ("Censorship and Literature" 488).

²⁰ Several of the *Drum* writers, notably Mphahlele, Modisane and Matshikiza, went on to write autobiographies after leaving the country (they were of course following in the footsteps of Peter Abrahams's *Tell Freedom*). The autobiography is one of the most important genres of black writing in South Africa, but is not the main focus of the present study. One should note Olney's estimation that these works represent "a body of autobiographical writing that is the most vital, the most intense and energetic that we have from any part of Africa" (248).

Literature in English” 61). The impact of exile on individual writers was often devastating: “One by one they left the intolerable situation in South Africa looking for other, perhaps better, truths. One by one they failed to find the world where such truths existed. Some, like Nat, committed suicide; some sank into mediocrity; some drank themselves to death” (Klaaste 104).

Visser points to the difficulty in estimating the effect of censorship in South Africa:

We have no way of knowing how early black writers might have developed in the absence of structural censorship, or how many more of them there might have been. We cannot know what exiled writers might have written had they been able to continue living and working in South Africa, or how much more productive they might have been had they not been cut off from their audience and their milieu. We do not know how many books may have gone unpublished, or even unwritten, in the knowledge that they might be proscribed. . . . Ultimately, no analysis of censorship or the history of its various phases can reveal the damage it has done to our literature, our scholarship, our society.

(“Censorship and Literature” 493)²¹

These measures ensured that from the mid-sixties there was a period of relative silence as far as black writers in South Africa were concerned. Those who were left in the country generally stopped writing (like James Matthews) or turned to other pursuits. Rive chose to further his academic career; his periods of study overseas (in the United States and Britain) culminated in the award of a doctorate from Oxford University. The impact of these measures on his creative life was, however, severe: according to Stephen Gray, “When I first met Richard he was immobilised, depressed, going through the motions of a literary career without writing at all, unable legally to reach an audience – except occasionally for a small and loyal one overseas, notably through that lifesaver, the BBC Africa Service” (*Free-Lancers and Literary Biography* 161). Rive himself says that during this period – “around 1964 or 1965, when every Black writer of importance had either left the country or been banned, exiled or jailed” – he was “almost in despair” (Interview with Lindfors 327). By 1970,

²¹ In his article Visser discusses the provisions and effect of the revised Publications Act of 1974, and examines the somewhat more liberal or reformist censorship regime which operated under J.C.W. van Rooyen, who succeeded Judge J. H. Snyman as Chairman of the Appeal Board in 1980. He also refers to the outcry which attended the banning of Etienne Leroux’s *Magersfontein, O Magersfontein* in 1976 – an event which hastened the end of Snyman’s reign.

according to Rive, his output was “a mere trickle” (*Writing Black* 129). Unlike La Guma or Brutus or (in the 1970s) James Matthews, Rive did not engage directly in political action: he was still able to build something of an academic career, and establish an international reputation as a spokesperson for and interpreter of black South African writing. But whatever his achievements and recognition outside the country, when he returned to South Africa, he found himself “part of the vast majority of unenfranchised South Africans” (*Writing Black* 126).

Writers who were also politically committed activists faced the full might of the South African state. Mphahlele’s career as a teacher in South Africa was brought to an end as a result of his opposition to the Bantu Education Act of 1953. He describes the factors that led to his decision to go into exile in his autobiography, *Down Second Avenue*. As a leader of SACPO Alex la Guma helped to organise the Congress of the People held at Kliptown in 1955. He was one of the 156 Treason Trialists, and in the aftermath of Sharpeville he was detained without trial, subjected to house-arrest and served with a banning order. He also survived an apparent assassination attempt. Dennis Brutus, the poet and political activist, was convicted under the Sabotage Act and imprisoned on Robben Island; on his release he was served with banning orders prohibiting him from writing anything at all, from drafting anything that might be published, or from composing slogans! He was only able to read La Guma’s *A Walk in the Night* in exile in the United Kingdom.²² As he points out, “This gives you some idea of the kind of sterility, the barrenness which is being created in South Africa in cultural terms” (94). This barrenness was to continue until the silence was finally broken by the publication of Msthalali’s *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* in 1971. But by then something of a sea-change was taking place in South African political and cultural life.

²² He reports that while writing his novella La Guma had to hide the pages under the linoleum: if he was raided, the Special Branch would only find the page that was in the typewriter! (Brutus 94).

CHAPTER 7

THE RISE OF BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

Something had to fill the political and cultural void of the mid-sixties, and that something was Black Consciousness – a movement that was as much a philosophical and cultural movement as it was a political movement. In the space of a few years Black Consciousness transformed the political and cultural landscape of the country; clearly, it was an idea whose time had come. For the purposes of this study, it is sufficient to look briefly at the origins of Black Consciousness, indicate some of its distinguishing features, and point to its cultural significance. This is a necessary prelude to a more detailed consideration of the literature that emerged in the 1970s, much of it directly inspired by Black Consciousness.

The origins of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) can be traced to the disenchantment of a group of black university students, led by Steve Biko, with their continued participation in NUSAS, the national student organisation based at the liberal (white) university campuses.¹ They linked up with students who were part of the black caucus within the University Christian Movement (formed in 1967), and their discussions led to the formation of the South African Students' Organisation (SASO) which held its first national conference at Turfloop (the University of the North) in July 1969. By late 1979 SASO had achieved widespread acceptance at black campuses. The SASO Policy Manifesto of July 1971 is a seminal Black Consciousness document. It provides a new, inclusive definition of “blackness” – one that could include “coloured” South Africans and South Africans of Indian descent:

We define Black People as those who are by law or tradition, politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in South African society and identifying themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realisation of their aspirations.

(Karis and Gerhart 481)

The document goes on to state that SASO “upholds the concept of Black Consciousness and the drive towards black awareness as the most logical and

¹ In this section my primary sources of information are the chapter entitled “Children of Soweto” in Lodge’s *Black Politics in South Africa* (321-362), and Karis and Gerhart’s *From Protest to Challenge* (Vol. 5).

significant means of ridding ourselves of the shackles that bind us to perpetual servitude.” It offers the following definition:

- (i) BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS is an attitude of mind, a way of life.
- (ii) The basic tenet of Black Consciousness is that the Blackman must reject all value systems that seek to make him a foreigner in the country of his birth and reduce his basic human dignity.
- (iii) The Blackman must build up his own value systems, see himself as self-defined and not defined by others.
- (iv) The concept of Black Consciousness implies the awareness by black people of the power they wield as a group, both economically and politically and hence group cohesion and solidarity are important facets of Black Consciousness.
- (v) BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS will always be enhanced by the totality of involvement of oppressed people, hence the message of Black Consciousness has to be spread to reach all sections of the Black community.

(Karis and Gerhart 482)

This captures some of the distinctive features of Black Consciousness thinking. It was both a political and a cultural movement, and drew on an understanding of the social and psychic consequences of three centuries of colonial oppression and cultural denigration. It openly confronted the pathology of racism, and sought to overcome the deep-seated sense of inferiority instilled in black South Africans by promoting a sense of pride, self-reliance and self-assertion – hence the slogan, “Black man, you’re on your own”. It sought to affirm “black values” and appealed to a common “black identity” shared by all those (coloured, Indian and African) who were victims of racial oppression. It was driven by an educated elite composed mainly of university students at the segregated black campuses, but also by newly graduated teachers and by clergymen.

The essential elements of Black Consciousness can be briefly illustrated by reference to Biko’s *I Write What I Like* (1978), the collection of speeches, articles and documents collected and edited by Aelred Stubbs. Biko clearly understood that he and his fellow students in SASA were filling a leadership vacuum: “No one else will ever accept the challenge until we, of our own accord, accept the inevitable fact that ultimately the leadership of the non-white peoples in this country rests with us” (“SASO – its Role, its Significance and its Future” 7).

In a seminal article entitled “We Blacks”, Biko poses the question. “is [the black man] simply a defeated person?” – and answers in the affirmative:

The logic behind white domination is to prepare the black man for a subservient role in this country. . . . To a large extent the evil-doers have succeeded in producing at the output end of their machine a kind of black man who is a man only in form. This is the extent to which the process of dehumanisation has advanced. . . . The type of black man we have today has lost his manhood. Reduced to an obliging shell, he looks with awe at the white power structure and accepts what he regards as the 'inevitable position'. Deep inside his anger mounts at the accumulating insult, but he vents it in the wrong direction – on his fellow man in the township, on the property of black people. . . . All in all the black man has become a shell, a shadow of a man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity.

(“We Blacks” 28)

Biko goes on to discuss the extent to which the coloniser has succeeded in “emptying the Native’s brain of all form and content” and distorting and disfiguring the African. The inevitable result is that “the African child learns to hate his heritage in his days at school. So negative is the image presented to him that he tends to find solace only in close identification with the white society” (29). There is thus an urgent need for the black man to reclaim a sense of his history and culture as inherently valuable: “A people without a positive history is like a vehicle without an engine. . . . They always live in the shadow of a more successful society” (29). Among the virtues he discerns in traditional African culture is “the oneness of community” and “a sense of belonging to the community” (30). Black people have allowed themselves to be “white-washed”; as a result they make “white standards” the yardstick by which they judge each other. This effort at decolonising the mind also entails a critique of Christianity: “The bible must continually be shown to have something to say to the black man to keep him going on his long journey towards realisation of the self. . . . Black theology seeks to do away with the spiritual poverty of the black people” (31). Biko concludes by quoting Sekou Toure: “You must be an element of that popular energy which is entirely called forth for the freeing, the progress and the happiness of Africa. There is no place outside that fight for the artist or the intellectual who is not himself concerned with and completely at one with the people in the great battle of Africa and of suffering humanity” (32)

It will be clear from this that Black Consciousness was primarily a movement rooted in South Africa; it springs from an analysis of the political, social and

psychological situation of the black person in this country in the 1960s. Kane-Berman quotes Percy Qoboza, editor of *The World*, to this effect: “Black consciousness is a natural development for people who find themselves in our position. The first priority of the movement was to rid the black man of his inferior status and slave mentality born out of denigration and humiliation” (104). It drew on the Africanist tradition within both the ANC and (obviously) the PAC, on the African humanism of leaders like Nyerere and Kuanda, as well as on the insights of Black Theology and the Black Power movement in the United States.² In particular, the influence of Fanon is at times clearly evident in Biko’s political and cultural analysis of the South African situation as one variant of a wider colonial condition. Biko’s achievement was to combine these various influences in a coherent and eloquent way, and express his intuitions and perceptions in a language which was clear and accessible to his immediate constituency. Central to his thinking was the Fanonian realisation that “the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed” (“White Racism and Black Consciousness” (68)). Biko in effect laid down a challenge to black South African intellectuals, artists and writers, all of whom had a key role to play in communicating and popularising these insights.³ Clearly, for Biko (and Black Consciousness) the artist is accountable to his community, and cannot dissociate himself or herself from the predicament and struggles of his or her people.

In many respects Black Consciousness was the logical answer to the predicament in which many of the intellectuals and writers of the *Drum* generation found themselves – caught between the white, Western culture to which they had been introduced at their mission schools (St. Peters, Lovedale, Marianhill, Adams College) and to which many of them aspired, and the urban African society in which they were in fact immersed (Sophiatown, Marabastad, Newclare, Orlando). This is the kind of limbo that Themba describes in “Crepuscule”: “Those of us who have been

² “To say that SASO’s ideology was imported from elsewhere in the black world would be to assign much too little significance to the life experiences and political intuition of the movement’s founders. Rather, foreign writings, critically sifted for their most relevant ideas, enriched the language and analytical content of black consciousness thinking . . .” (Karis and Gerhart 103).

³ BC also mounted a serious challenge to white liberals and radicals in this country, who were forced to reconsider many of their political attitudes and cultural assumptions. In particular, of course, they could no longer claim to be speaking or acting on behalf of the black man. They were also, implicitly, challenged to redirect their energies to their own section of the population. As Sanders points out, “A refusal of the dynamics of advocacy and of activism by proxy is central to the analysis Biko presented” (167). These effects can be seen in the work of the study commissions set up by the SPR-CAS in the early 70s. Gordimer, Breytenbach and Turner were prominent among the white writers and intellectuals whose thinking was radicalized as a result of the impact of Black Consciousness. Sanders discusses this in some detail in his chapter on Black Consciousness (166-174).

detribalised and caught in the characterless world of belonging nowhere, have a bitter sense of loss” (8). The absence of his indigenous culture is “painfully felt in this whiteman’s world where everything significant is forbidden or ‘Not for thee!’ . . . It is a crepuscular shadow life in which we wander as spectres seeking meaning for ourselves” (8). We have also seen how (in “The Bottom of the Bottle”) Themba shrinks from the embrace of the ANC, and from their claim to know how he feels and thinks as a black man (231).

In similar fashion Modisane (in *Blame Me on History*) articulates his dilemma as a black man, and even anticipates some of the points made by Biko. Being black in South Africa entails a recognition of “the brutal, dominant presence of the white man in South Africa” (35). He has to watch his mother being insulted and sworn at (“kafir meid”) because she is black: “I was helpless in the coffin of my skin” (36). He wishes he were white, since this seems the only way to avoid insult and humiliation (36) – yet he is acutely aware of his rejection by the “white world” (88). He understands that the history of his people is denigrated in school: “great chiefs” are described as “bloodthirsty animal brutes”, African people represented as “savage and barbaric black hordes” (41). He sees the way in which black people “wear masks of submission and servility” and prostrate themselves before the white man (55). As he stands over the ruins of his family’s house in Bertha Street he feels “the tragedy of dispossession”: all he can bequeath to his children is “the debris and humiliation of defeat” (10). He wonders how he can explain to his daughter “300 years of slavery”, and the terms he uses to describe his own condition are “emasculatation” and “castration” (76). He anticipates that she will, like him, develop “a complicated ambivalence towards the white man, a strange mixture of hatred, fear, and a snickering admiration for the race which has for so long and with such efficiency imposed its will over the destiny of the black South African” (76). Modisane was able to describe the malady; it was left to Biko and his generation of black writers and intellectuals to propose the cure, and to finally break the psychological and ideological stranglehold of three hundred years of colonialism and white rule.⁴ For Modisane, blackness was the sign of humiliation, defeat and inferiority: “Because I

⁴ Biko’s generation of intellectuals and activists were assisted by the fact that it was no longer possible – twenty years into National Party rule – to imagine that assimilation into the dominant culture and its power structures was still possible. As Karis and Carter point out, “A generation earlier, before the advent of National Party rule, while liberals had held out the vague promise of eventual assimilation, but by 1970 it was impossible for anyone to cling to such a delusion” (101).

am black, I am a piece of the ugliness of Sophiatown and a victim of the violence of white South Africa” (140). It took Black Consciousness to transform “black” into a positive term: a black person need no longer be ashamed of being black; a black man need no longer view himself as a helpless victim. In Biko’s words, Black Consciousness sought to “infuse the black community with a new-found pride in themselves, their efforts, their value systems, their culture, their religion and their outlook on life” (“The Definition of Black Consciousness” (49)). This was a simple but powerful message, and one that could be understood at some level even by quite young schoolchildren.⁵ The seeds sown by Biko and his compatriots were eventually to explode on the streets of Soweto in 1976, where the defiance of a new young generation of school pupils heralded a new political era: “The emergence of SASO brought to the surface an outpouring of anger and frustration held in check during the previous decade” (Karis and Gerhart 98).

Black Consciousness has been criticized from a number of perspectives, some more valid than others. An immediate and obvious deficiency is its apparent blindness to gender-based discrimination and to the power of patriarchal structures and thinking. As Karis and Gerhart point out, it tended to take patriarchal values for granted, and its language was frequently marked by “a sexist style and rhetoric” (108).⁶ It was also criticized from a Marxist perspective for its apparent prioritising of race over class as an explanatory factor.⁷ This was partly a strategic consideration, but it also flowed from the conviction of BC theorists that while these two categories overlapped, their oppression was primarily experienced as racial oppression. The entire apartheid order and ideology of course reinforced this perception. This criticism was often linked with the observation that most Black Consciousness leaders belonged to the educated middle class or *petit bourgeoisie*, and did not reflect the interests or concerns of black

⁵ In particular, the raised black fist was a powerful symbol, and one that was almost instantly comprehensible. Karis and Carter note that “by the late 1970s it was not unusual for someone driving through country districts to be greeted by children at the roadside making fist-up Black Power salutes. The message of the movement was simple and compelling” (98-99).

⁶ Ramphela concurs with this in her discussion of the “dynamics of gender” within BC organizations; “Women were thus involved in the movement because they were black. Gender as a political issue was not raised at all” (215). Even when the Black Women’s Federation was launched (in December 1975) to mobilize women, it was not concerned with gender issues (216).

⁷ Karis and Gerhart point out that the “classical writings of Marxism” were of course banned and did not seem to have much circulation outside the ranks of the Non-European Unity Movement (a small intellectual elite with its support base in Cape Town). However, they also acknowledge that by the mid-1970s, “interest in Marxism [in the BCM] rose dramatically as confidence in the practical efficacy of race-based nationalism began to slacken” (105).

workers.⁸ This helps to explain why Neville Alexander (writing in 1974, under house arrest, and with limited access to BC documents) could ask whether Black Consciousness was not perhaps “a reactionary tendency” (238). Black Consciousness has also been accused of “essentialism” – by postulating the existence of “black values” or a common “black” identity.⁹ It can be criticized for “replicating rather than moving beyond the apartheid discourse it opposed” (Geertsema, “Ndebele, Fanon, Agency and Irony” 758.) It needs to be recognised, however, that “black” was an inclusive term for all those (including those classified as “coloured” or “Indian”) who suffered racial oppression, and that the appeal to what might seem to be essential cultural differences was in part a strategic necessity. As with other national liberation movements, this emphasis on cultural difference was designed to counter the hegemony of “white” (Western) culture and assert the dignity and value of African cultures. Without this, how would the black person in South Africa recover a sense of self-worth? Black Consciousness may also seem to lay itself open to the related charge of “nativism”,¹⁰ but again it can be argued that Biko and his compatriots were aware of the impossibility of a return to precolonial cultural forms. Biko recognises that since 1652 black South Africans have been experiencing “a process of ‘acculturation’”; his objection is that this process has been “extremely one-sided”, and that faced with the apparently overwhelming superiority of the culture of the coloniser, black South Africans often (sometimes out of necessity) relinquished their traditions and their belief systems. His assertion is simply that elements of these traditional belief and value systems in fact survive, and form part of what he calls “the modern African culture” (“Some African Cultural Concepts” 41). He never envisages a return to some idyllic pre-colonial past. It will in any case be obvious from this (necessarily brief) account of the influences that helped shape Black Consciousness that Biko and his fellow theorists (like all third-world intellectuals) were themselves a

⁸ Lodge points out that this did not mean that these leaders were not influential: “The student advocates of Black Consciousness were to become school teachers, priests, and journalists, and its basic themes were taken up in the popular press, in township cultural events, and even, though at a later stage, in African consumer-oriented advertising” (324).

⁹ Karis and Gerhart refer to the notion that “a common ‘black’ identity” exists among black South Africans as “a counter-myth” (102). Part of Sole’s argument against postcolonial discourse theory is that “in such criticism race becomes an essentialist category, . . . and socio-economic and historical determinations and fluctuations . . . are lost” (“Real Toads” 91). In my view part of the challenge for postcolonial theory is to find a way of accounting for (and enabling) agency and resistance on the part of the colonized. Whatever its (theoretical) shortcomings, Black Consciousness certainly achieved this.

¹⁰ This is defined by Ashcroft et al as “the desire to return to indigenous practices and cultural forms as they existed in precolonial society” (*Key Concepts* 159).

product of the historical encounter with the West.¹¹ To the criticism that BC theorists were simply reversing the colonial binaries, one might reply that their ultimate (humanist) objective was a society in which all of its members were accorded full recognition: what Biko envisaged was “a true humanity where power politics will have no place” (“The Quest for a True Humanity” (90); what he resisted was integration on white terms. By apparently privileging “blackness” (“Writing Black”), this study in no way seeks to minimize or deny what Appiah calls “the mutual dependencies that history has thrust upon us” (72) – dependencies that are the focus of much postcolonial theory and criticism.¹² Postcoloniality can be defined as “that condition in which colonised peoples seek to take their place, forcibly or otherwise, as historical subjects” (Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* 3). This was central to the project of Black Consciousness, which in a remarkably short time succeeded in transforming the political and cultural landscape of South Africa. This did not happen by accident: it was the result of hard political work in difficult and dangerous circumstances:

In the six years before the Soweto uprising, hundreds of young blacks passed through formation schools organised first by SASO and later by offshoots of the black consciousness movement. Dozens of training workshops were conducted, sometimes lasting three or four days Attendance at a typical session might range from a dozen to more than 60 participants. Not since the Communist Party had developed worker night schools as a way to teach, recruit and motivate party cadres had such an effective method of organised politicization been applied to black South Africans. The principle objective of the formation school was to ‘conscientise’, that is, to transpose mere anger into a more informed political understanding and response to what SASO called ‘the system’.

(Karis and Gerhart 132)

¹¹ This point is made by (among others) Appiah (68). “For us to forget Europe is to suppress the conflicts that have shaped our identities” (Appiah 72).

¹² Sanders argues that Black Consciousness grew out of a recognition of the black man’s own complicity in perpetuating the apartheid system: “The first step therefore is . . . to remind [the black man] of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of his birth” (Biko, “We Blacks” (29). This “complicity” could take the form of passivity or victimhood or an internalized inferiority complex; it could take the form of co-option and collusion; or it could reveal itself in a continuing susceptibility to the promise of the Enlightenment project – the promise (of acceptance and inclusion) extended by white liberals in particular. White liberals (rather than Afrikaner nationalists) were frequently the target of black consciousness critique because their influence was much more insidious, and hence more difficult to resist.

MBULELO MZAMANE AND THE 1970s

It is widely accepted that (for reasons indicated in the previous chapter) there was a hiatus in the mid-to-late 1960s which threatened the continuity and even the very existence of black literature written in English in South Africa. According to Mzamane, “Black Consciousness and the literature and cultural output it inspired emerged in the midst of the political and cultural repression of the sixties which followed Sharpeville. Many of the writers of the Black Consciousness era began their work in a near vacuum” (“The Impact of Black Consciousness” (179).

When I started writing, it was as if there had never been writers before in my country. By the time I learned to write many people – Zeke, Kgositsile, Mazisi Kunene, Dennis Brutus – had left the country and were living in exile. We could not read what they had written, so it was as if we were starting straight from the beginning.

(Serote, “Panel” 25)

In his essay, “The Black Writer Today: Problems and Dilemmas” (1976) Sepamla refers to the virtual “non-existence” of the black writer in South Africa: “we are non-people or invisible people” (116). He speaks for a slightly older generation (he was born in 1939): he was, he says, brought up on the English classics, but to be properly nurtured “[he] would have liked to be fed on Mphahlele, La Guma, Themba, Nkosi” and on the African American writers – “But alas, all this has been denied” (116). He laments his “emptiness” and “rootlessness” (116).

Miriam Tlali, who grew up in Sophiatown, testifies to the sheer difficulty of gaining access to books and libraries. When she wrote her first novel, *Muriel at Metropolitan* (1975) she had not been able to read the work of South African or African American writers: “My search for books by Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi, La Guma, Brutus, Tabata, Soyinka, Luthuli, Mandela, Sobukwe and others was fruitless because these were considered an anathema by the authorities” (45).¹³ Public libraries only began to admit black persons in the 1970s, and libraries in the township were either non-existent or very limited in their holdings. In a more detailed article in *Index on Censorship* (1984) Tlali reviews legislative and education obstacles confronting the black writer (and reader) in South Africa, and concludes: “Faced with so much

¹³ These remarks are taken from an article originally published in *The Daily News* (19 June 1980) and reprinted in *Soweto Poetry*, edited by Chapman (44-45)

control from the cradle to the grave, it is evident that for an aspirant black writer to emerge, and succeed in having his or her work accepted for publication, to obtain recognition even within the country itself, is an enormous task” (24). Tlali’s case illustrates what Visser calls the “structural censorship” that operated in South Africa – a consequence of the racial and class divisions which permeated the institutions responsible for the publication and distribution of literary texts (“Censorship and Literature” 486). If one has received an inferior education, lacks fluency in the dominant language (English), lacks access to books and to opportunities for further education and advancement, and if, on top of these disadvantages, one is a black woman, then the chances of one’s ever becoming a published writer (in any language) must have been remote. It was in this unpromising soil that the literature of the Black Consciousness had to take root and grow.

As a result of his relatively privileged family circumstances and his secondary school education in Swaziland, Mzamane is something of an exception to the above. His father was an Anglican priest and his mother a staff nurse, but he tells us that, like other township children, much of his early education was picked up in the streets. “On the whole, my childhood was not only a secure one, materially and emotionally, but it was a decidedly happy and carefree one as well” (“I Remember” (vii)). Unlike his contemporaries who remained inside South Africa, in Swaziland he had access to the works of a wide range of South African authors (he mentions Kunene, Kgotsitsile, Brutus, Ahrahams, Mphahlele, Bosman and (perhaps most significantly) Can Themba, then in exile in Swaziland, and one of the teachers at St. Joseph’s). This personal contact with Themba must have acted as a spur to his literary interest and ambition, and created an intimate link with the preceding generation of black writers.¹⁴

My literary models soon began to emerge. Can Themba’s prize-winning story, “The Suit”, made an immediate impression on me when it first appeared in *The Classic*; “Dube Train Revisited” [one of Mzamane’s own stories] is an obvious throwback to the world of Can Themba’s “Dube Train”; similarly, Bloke Modisane’s delightful satire, “The Dignity of Begging”, Dugmore Boetie’s work, Alex La Guma, Richard Rive and James Matthews all captured my imagination in a way no other group of writers had done before. . . . I have already

¹⁴ These comments apply equally to Njabulo Ndebele, who, like Mzamane, was educated at St Christopher’s in Swaziland, and enjoyed the same access to the work of an earlier generation of South African writers. The close relationship between the two writers stems from their schooldays in Swaziland.

explained how I studied the writings of Ezekiel Mphahlele and Peter Abrahams very closely. So that, unlike many students of my generation and those before, I was never undernourished on an unvarying diet of Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Keats, Austen, Dickens and the rest.
 (“I Remember” ix-x)

The contrast with Serote, Sepamla and Tlali could hardly be greater. It is not surprising that Mzamane’s own short fiction shows obvious affinities with that of his *Drum* predecessors; in his work we can see what might have been in terms of a developing tradition of fiction writing among black writers in this country. “As a result of an early and unbroken exposure to my people’s literary heritage, it is probably true to say that in my world I took black consciousness very much for granted” (“I Remember” x).¹⁵ This helps to explain why among the qualities celebrated in *Mzala and Other Stories* are the survival skills demonstrated by particular individuals, and a devil-may-care attitude to authority and convention. It may also help to explain the liveliness of the writing, and the verve with which particular characters – such as Mzala himself – are captured. These qualities were noted by some of his early reviewers. According to Lionel Abrahams, “the writing manifests an unusual freedom: to treat of individuals as individuals, to laugh in sheer amusement, to let protest . . . take a back seat.”¹⁶ Abrahams also comments on Mzamane’s “distinct gift for starting characters visibly into life” and on his “flair for dramatic situations”. It is no surprise to read in the author’s Introduction (“I Remember . . .”) that all the characters in his stories were based on people he knew: “In a few cases I’ve hardly bothered to disguise their names for fear I should lose their essence” (xii). This is true in particular of Mzala, the central character in the stories in Part One: “Mzala, who is my own cousin and was ignominiously repatriated to the Transkei for the umpteenth time only the other day, is a real person” (xi). It seems reasonable to suggest that the vitality and immediacy of the writing springs at least in part from this close relation to real-life prototypes. The anecdotal flavour and informal narrative style are also consistent with a community that relies largely on the oral exchange of information, news and gossip. (Here Mphahlele’s “Lesane” stories are an important precedent.) Throughout the collection, one senses that Mzamane (like Mphahlele) is tapping into the rich oral culture of the township, with its fund of stories, its anecdotes and its proverbial wisdom.

¹⁵ I suggest that in this context what Mzamane means by “black consciousness” is something like “the black experience” or “the black perspective”.

¹⁶ Abrahams was reviewing *Mzala* in the *Rand Daily Mail* of 2 February 1981.

There is little evidence in *Mzala* of the overt protest or the committed writing that Mzamane regards as virtually obligatory for the black South African writer. In his critical writing of the 1970s he presents a view of black writing as strongly politicised, and describes it as a “committed literature”. Writing in the *New Classic* (1978), he makes the familiar assertion that “a writer [in South Africa] is unimportant, irrelevant and probably alienated unless he is political. Art and politics have become inseparable . . . for the simple reason that politics pervades all aspects on a Blackman’s existence” (42). Writing in *Donga* in 1977 he is even more explicit:

I want to suggest that the only relevant literature in an African context is a committed literature. . . . We can’t politicize too blatantly because only Bantustan politics are legal. . . . So we turn to the short story and shout our message loudly and clearly. It doesn’t pay to be too subtle, too many people choose to misunderstand you; there’s little good in being too artistic, either, very many people neglect the message and applaud the art. So we protest in categorical, unambiguous terms.
 (“The Short Story Tradition” 8)

While this may describe some of the fiction produced by the *Staffrider* writers, it hardly applies to his own first collection of short stories. “Politics” may pervade the lives of his characters, but there is no sign of the kind of unambiguous, strident protest that he endorses; in particular, there is no attempt to “shout a message loudly and clearly” (8). If anything, his stories (like those of the *Drum* writers) are characterised by the avoidance of any explicit protest or any obvious attempt to conscientise. The reason for this apparent contradiction is not hard to find: the critical essays are all written after 1976; the stories collected in *Mzala* all seem to have been written prior to 1976, although the collection was published by Ravan Press only in 1980.¹⁷ It would seem that Soweto 1976 was as much a watershed in the personal, political and literary life of Mzamane as it was in the life of the nation. The fiction that he writes subsequent to 1976 is very different in character, and exhibits many of the overtly political features to which he refers in his critical essays.¹⁸

¹⁷ “My Cousin and his Pick-Ups” was published in *Izwi* (1973) and “My Cousin and the Law” followed in 1975 (also in *Izwi*). “The Soweto Bride” appeared in *Contrast* in 1975, and “The Silva Cup is Broken” in *New Classic* in 1975. “A Present for my Wife” was published in *New Classic* in 1978, and “My Other Cousin Sita” appeared in *Staffrider* in 1978. It seems likely, however, that these last two stories were also written before 1976.

¹⁸ *The Children of Soweto*, which should be considered along with the other novels of the Soweto uprising (by Sepamla, Serote and Tlali) was published in 1982; a collection of stories, *The Children of the Diaspora and Other Stories of Exile*, was published in 1996.

The opening story of *Mzala*,¹⁹ ‘My Cousin Comes to Jo’burg,’ is a good example of the vitality of Mzamane’s writing. Mzal’ u Jola, who comes, we are told, from Tsolo in the Transkei, “has the stature of an adult gorilla and walks with his arms flung out and his hands curving in, like a cowboy ready to draw” (3). Although he has been in the city for some years, there was a time when (like the typical “Jim”) he was “as green and raw as a cabbage.” The story consists of a series of anecdotes relayed by Sabelo, the narrator. We see Mzala being ridiculed by the children who “rank” outside the shop where he goes to buy cool drink for the first time. Even his choice of cool drink (raspberry) sends them into peals of laughter: “Red and green are favourites of country folk where people of the city buy Fanta or Coke” (4). So unfamiliar is he with crime that when his uncle’s car is stolen he asks, ““But couldn’t they approach you decently and borrow the car if they needed it that badly?”” (5). When the narrator and his brother take him to see a movie (none other than that 1950s township favourite, *Street with No Name*) he embarrasses them by switching on the transistor radio he carries everywhere, provoking “an uproar of hisses, catcalls and invective from the audience.” When the narrator snatches it from him, he explains, ““I was going to insert the thing of the ear”” (6). The story traces Mzala’s evolution from “Xhosa mampara” to streetwise survivor. He is introduced to Jikida, “a sly man who could make his way out of a hungry crocodile’s mouth with ease”, and is befriended by the police sergeant, Mawulawula, who commands a “gang” of constables. Through his contacts at Crown Mines, he is able to find work, first as a cleaner, then as a cook. He qualifies for a pass, which, the narrator tells us, gives him a sense of space: “He refused to be confined to any one job, so that in his many years in the city he’s worked as a doctor, a painter, a priest and a prophet.” (12) Efforts to arrest and deport him are in vain – he always returns. In the end everyone says of him, ““Uvulekile manje”” – “he’s as wide-awake as an owl” (13). In fact, we are told, “he’s lived so long under the shadow of the vagrancy laws, the Influx Control regulations and the rest that he has come to consider such hazards as a shield and an umbrella. . . . He lives, as township folk never fail to point out, by ‘*Nkosi Sikelela*’” (13).

Mzal’u Jola is a survivor *par excellence*. From being a *moegoe*, a figure of fun and ridicule, he becomes adept at survival in the city – so much so that he is able to exploit the credulity of others in a variety of guises or occupations. In this way (as

¹⁹ “Mzala” means “cousin”.

Trump points out) the Mzala stories reverse the stereotypical Jim-comes-to-Joburg situation, and demonstrate the ability of ordinary people to adapt and even thrive in the city.²⁰ No longer an obvious type (the simple “Jim”), Mzal’ uJola comes to stand for qualities which Mzamane clearly admires – the resilience and resourcefulness which enabled people to survive the worst that the apartheid regime could do to them. This point is made explicit in the author’s “Introduction”, where he calls Jola “a folk-figure, a sort of indestructible Proteus sprung from the people” (xi). In the stories this emerges through his vivid depiction of Mzala’s capacity to turn any situation to his own advantage, and defy not only the restrictions imposed by apartheid, but also the strictures of the narrator’s parents. The narrator’s father is a minister and his mother a staff nurse (as were Mzamane’s own parents); both are pillars of middle-class respectability, and they view the comings and goings of Mzala, his “indiscriminate womanising” (14), his conspicuous consumption of alcohol, and his dubious acquaintances with a very jaundiced eye. In one story, the father actually drives one of Mzala’s “pick-ups” out of his house with a sjambok in the early hours of the morning. The narrator maintains a rather precarious balance, his allegiance divided between sympathy (or even admiration) for his cousin, and loyalty to his parents and their standards. The key value is survival. Jola and Mawulawula regard themselves as both “men of the world”; Jola’s maxim seems to be ““We must live, dear neph”” (38) – perhaps a conscious echo on Mzamane’s part of the title story of Mphahlele’s first collection. The keynote is one of appreciation for the zest for life displayed by Jola, the narrator’s “other cousin” Sitha, and the gallery of friends, relatives, conspirators and rogues who make their appearance in the stories that follow. A striking feature of the collection, then, is the *absence* of any overt “protest”. One looks in vain for instances of where the writing verges on the “spectacular”. Nor is there any foregrounding of the deprivation and poverty of the ghetto, its overcrowding, its squalor. The constant struggle of ordinary people to make ends meet and sustain some kind of family life – a feature of the “Lesane” stories and of many protest stories (compare Hutchinson’s stories in *New Age*) – is largely absent. Mzamane’s characters are survivors, not victims; in spite their circumstances, they get a kick out of life!

²⁰ “The Jola stories are Mzamane’s blunt rejoinder to the host of ‘Jim comes to Jo’burg’ narratives . . . which describe a black man’s fall to misery and destruction as a result of his journey to the city” (“Black South African Short Fiction” 49).

It seems legitimate, then, to view Mzamane's writing in *Mzala* as a continuation of the literary tradition he inherits from the *Drum* writers of the 1950s. He explicitly acknowledges his debt to these writers and dedicates one of the stories in *Mzala* ("Dube Train Revisited") to Can Themba.²¹ The influence of the *Drum* style can clearly be seen. When the narrator tells us that Jola's trousers "were now doing the jitterbug" (11), or when he reports that his heart "thumped like the piston of an unruly engine" (17) one is reminded, for example, of Modisane's flamboyant style in "The Dignity of Begging". More significant than these stylistic flourishes, however, is the ability to capture the idiom and flavour of the patois of the township: "S'wali used to check on Sitha, as they say in the streets" (53); "He has been wary of closing-in women, as they say, ever since" (27); "She's my stop station, as they say" (85). The influence of the language of the streets is evident throughout Mzamane's writing, and is further evidence of his debt to the *Drum* writers.²² In his Introduction to *Hungry Flames* Mzamane quotes Mphahlele on the question of the writer's use of English: "The African writer listens to the speech of his people, to the ring of dialogue in his home language, and struggles to find an approximation of the English equivalent" (xii). This very much reflects the style of *Mzala*, with its frequent use of what Mzamane calls "transliteration".

Lexical items which are unique to the dialect of the township are also common: the narrator's brother Soso is a "clever" who regards his cousin's suitor, S'wali, as a "moomish" (54). "Jack, ons moet gazaat," says Yster to no one in particular as he emerges nursing a hangover in "The Soweto Bride" (138).²³ Mzamane surpasses most of his predecessors in his attempts to capture the hybrid language of the ghetto (*tsotsitaal*) with its frequent code-switching. One example must suffice. On the bus on the way back from work Mazibuko informs the narrator

²¹ See, for example, Mzamane's comments in the Introduction to *Mzala*, ("I Remember . . ." (viii-x)), in his Introduction to *Hungry Flames* (ix-xvi) and in "The 50s and Beyond: An Evaluation," where he states, "I've repeatedly discovered influences of Mphahlele, Themba, Motsisi and others in my own work" (27-8).

²² In his Introduction to *Hungry Flames* he quotes Mphahlele on the question of the writer's use of English: "The African writer listens to the speech of his people, to the ring of dialogue in his home language, and struggles to find an approximation of the English equivalent." This very much reflects the style of *Mzala*, with its frequent use of what Mzamane calls "transliteration".

²³ A "clever" is a young, streetwise male, a "city slicker". "Ons moet gazaat" means "we must pool our resources" or put our money together. Many of these terms or references are explained in *A Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles* (Oxford UP, 1996). I cannot find an entry for "moomish", but the context suggests this refers to someone who is backward, unfamiliar with the city, a "moegoe".

that he has a leather jacket for his wife wrapped up on his lap – just such a jacket as the narrator has promised to buy his wife for her birthday.

“*Hawu! Jy’s nie curious nie?*” he asks and leans closer. “*Ek sal jou een ding vertel. Ngizokutshayela ngoba ngiyabona ukuthi awukeni. Jy ken nix. Jy word ’n moomish. Babhedgile* (sic), your wife and mine to see who gets a leather jacket first.” (88)²⁴

Mzamane’s rendering of this exchange rings true. Like the *Drum* writers he no longer feels constrained by standards of “correctness”, and the impact of his stories is heightened immeasurably by his ability to capture the mixed speech modes of the township. As Trump points out, the use of township varieties of English helps to establish “the writers’ kinship with all levels of their community. Although most of the writers are professional people, they describe and in many cases celebrate the vibrancy of this commonly used township speech” (“Black South African Short Fiction” 48). One should add that the use of *tsotsitaal*, with its subversion of linguistic norms and its mingling of languages, has ideological implications. It is one way of asserting a collective township identity and presence; at the same time its very linguistic hybridity flies in the face of attempts by the apartheid authorities to impose separate linguistic and cultural identities on the various racially and ethnically defined population groups. According to the narrator of “My Schooldays in Soweto” (in Mzamane’s *The Children of Soweto*) most students resented being taught Afrikaans and “preferred to communicate in [their] street dialect, called *tsotsi-taal*, the *lingua franca* of black youth in South Africa” (6). In “Black Writing and the Liberation Movement”, Trump suggests that black writers have adapted English to their own purposes “as part of their articulation of a counter-hegemonic discourse” (170). He adds that the adoption of black speech patterns and dialects “bears witness to the kinds of identification many of the writers wish to establish with the working class” (171).

In his foregrounding (and implicit valorising) of township speech, lifestyles and culture, Mzamane is building on the foundations laid by the *Drum* writers, and like them he is writing primarily for an audience of township “insiders”. For all these reasons, *Mzala and Other Stories* is an important contribution to the short story

²⁴ A rough translation of the italicized sections would be: “Aren’t you curious? Let me tell you one thing, I will tell you because I can see that you know nothing. You know nothing. You are being made a fool of. They have taken a bet.” I am grateful to my colleague in the Department of African Languages, Mhlobo Jadezweni, for his assistance.

tradition in this country. The stories are characterised by their rich verbal texture, by their often anecdotal flavour and structure, by their frequent reference to a base of township lore and practice, and of course by the humour which pervades them. Mzamane's use of humour and township talk continues the tradition initiated in particular by Casey Motsisi with his satirical "Bugs" and "On the Beat" columns which ran in *Drum* from 1958.²⁵ Humour – the ability to laugh at what is inherently absurd or ridiculous or incongruous (or even painful) – is an invaluable resource, and is in its own way a form of resistance to an oppressive (and humourless) regime. It is another indicator of the resilience and adaptability of black South Africans in apartheid South Africa.

When one turns to the stories that constitute Part Two of the collection, however, some awkward questions arise. These stories focus on the attitudes, values and lifestyle of the aspirant black petty bourgeoisie. In "A Present for my Wife" the neighbour's wife, Meisie, has got "all the comforts you'd think a woman needs. Bedroom suite, kitchen scheme and now a fridge. She's by far the best dressed woman in our street, the first to wear an Afro wig and all that." (79-80). The story centres on the narrator's attempts to satisfy his wife's appetite for material goods: she is determined to keep up with the Joneses – or in this case the Mazibukos! His acquisition of a fridge makes it possible for her to start a rather exclusive shebeen catering for the township elite, but this in turn leads to increased demands – in particular, for a leather jacket which the narrator promises to buy her for her birthday. The complex deception which he devises to satisfy his wife supplies the main narrative interest. The narrator (like Mzala) is someone who lives by his wits, and one can admire the ingenuity with which he wriggles out of tight corners. In this respect he (like Mzala) can be seen as a distant descendent of the trickster figure of traditional African folklore. There are, however, significant differences: the first-person narrator here is middle class, sophisticated, holds down a white-collar job, and is apparently secure in his tenure of a township house. What he is up against is not so much the restrictions of the apartheid system as the demands of his "nagging" wife. The narrator's opening question – "What do you do with a nagging wife?" (77) – sets the

²⁵ Mzamane recalls how he and his friends at school in Swaziland would "struggle to outdo one another with Motsisiisms in [their writing]" ("Introduction" ix). An often overlooked influence is that of Herman Charles Bosman: Mzamane describes how he 'kept a dilapidated copy of Bosman's *Mafeking Road* to which [he] returned again and again' ("I Remember" ix).

tone and establishes a rapport with the reader on the basis of an assumed commonality of values. His tone is, typically, one of injured reasonableness:

She knows very well that I barely earn enough to enable us to rise above *pap* and *morogo*. Yet she expects me to buy expensive presents of leather jackets, mink coats and evening dresses – which she'll never wear, anyway, since we can't afford to attend balls and shows. (77)

The narrator comes across as a thoroughly engaging fellow whose various stratagems are justified by the need to placate his wife – while at the same time not neglecting his own comforts and needs. To this end he resorts to stealing money from his wife's purse, doctoring his pay packet, siphoning off part of the earnings from the shebeen, and lying fluently whenever, as he puts it, “survival demands it” (85). (Again, survival is the key value.) His “shyness” with women is presented as a problem to be overcome: when he finally manages to acquire a girl friend (“an ebony beauty with milk white teeth and glossy thighs” (86)) he is simply following the example of “other fellows who have *dinyatsi* to whom they can escape” (78)! His attitude to his wife is condescending, defensive and self-justifying. He maintains a steady flow of disparaging, belittling or demeaning remarks, often focussing on her rather ample size: “The largest I could get was a 36. These things aren't designed for battleships” (85). He steals from her, lies to her, and systematically deceives her – all without any sign of scruple or remorse. His attitudes are in fact thoroughly sexist, if not misogynist, and are quite incompatible with any real respect for his wife as a person or an equal. The story represents a culture where male solidarity and marital infidelity are the norm; women are either the threatening or unreasonable “other”, or they are viewed as sex objects.

The reader finds himself (or, even more problematically, herself!) in a position where it is difficult not to feel compromised. The narrative strategy is simply to assume approval on the part of the (implicitly male) reader. Should we allow ourselves to be entertained and amused by the narrator's wit and guile, or should we censure what any gender-sensitive reader would regard as his unashamedly sexist attitudes and behaviour? I can find no evidence from within the story to suggest that the implied author's norms are at variance with those of the narrator. The narrator is

not exposed to irony, and no other perspective is supplied as a possible corrective.²⁶ If there is to be a corrective, it is left to the reader to supply it. Our dilemma as readers is that we cannot both distance ourselves from the narrator and at the same time applaud his ingenuity and respond to his humour: we either criticize or condone. The other stories in the second part of the collection do not help to resolve this dilemma.

“The Soweto Bride” is perhaps the most interesting of these stories, and here the narrator occupies a more complex subject position. The story is built around the reception given to Solomzi, who returns from the United States with an African-American wife, Norma. Solomzi is resplendent in his “white *Arrow* shirt, black pleatless *Mayfair* slacks, black cardigan and a pair of *Florsheim* shoes I had seen in *Ebony*” (126). He sports an Afro and looks “more American” than any of the American visitors who have “graced the streets of Soweto in recent years” (126) In the story “America” comes to stand for whatever is smart, elegant, modern, sophisticated – whatever (by implication) any upwardly mobile young Sowetan might aspire to.²⁷ Norma, who is plainly dressed, disappoints from the first, and when she opens her mouth she disappoints even more. In conversation she is unresponsive, unenthusiastic about the planned welcome-back party, and – what is worse – she talks back: “Do you usually treat adults like kindergarten kids?” she asks (127). The narrator begins to question whether she is “the assimilable type” and even wonders whether you could “safely give this one a black eye if she ‘did nonsense’”:

She seemed the type who would lay a charge with the police against her husband. Give me my township type any time, I thought, as my mind automatically shifted to Kedibone, a staff nurse double-qualified, general and midwifery, but one who’d never double-negative any suggestion I made.

(128)

One could hardly find a more explicit example of male sexism and aggression, but it is one that seems entirely in keeping with the masculinist culture represented in these stories. When it comes to women, the narrator can only think in stereotypes, and

²⁶ Most critics pass silently over this awkwardness. One who does not is Naidoo. According to him, “We are encouraged to admire his [the narrator’s] wit, his resilience, his charming male cunning” (59).

²⁷ The fascination with American fashions, styles, modes of speech and popular culture was of course also an important element of the Sophiatown culture of the 1950s. “The Soweto Bride” presents us with an updated, 70s version of this same fascination, which it partly satirises. The difference is that here the Sowetans who appropriate these elements of American culture are part of an emerging middle-class elite.

Norma is guilty of flouting the first requirement of any woman, which it would seem is submissiveness. Later in the story Phambili (the narrator) admires Solomzi's firmness in "handling" Norma, and guesses from her expression that Solomzi had been showing her "just where women got off in Africa" (137). When they finally leave the narrator comments: "He was dragging her off to bed to give her, I hoped, a taste of African manhood." It comes as no surprise to discover that before the evening is out the narrator has himself administered a mild beating to Kedibone. One searches in vain for any implicit or explicit condemnation of this resort to physical violence. The narrator of "A Present for my Wife" feels at one point that he must do something to assert himself: "This woman can be green, green with rudeness. Does she want everybody to know that she has me by the cock?" (87). In Solomzi's case, it is very definitely Norma who has the upper hand. He has to spend most of his leisure time socialising in town with Norma's friends, and sees less and less of his township pals. "Jack, *daardie cherrie druk Sol met hom billy,*"²⁸ remarks Yster succinctly. It would seem that the reality behind the macho posturing is that it is often the woman who is actually in control!

It is difficult to believe that Mzamane would actually endorse the sentiments or the behaviour represented in the story, but if one examines the story itself there is no internal evidence that these attitudes are being implicitly or explicitly criticized, satirised or subverted. It is true that the superficial parroting of slogans popularised by the American Black Power movement ("Soul Sister", "Black is Beautiful") is undercut by what the story itself seems to reveal: far from acculturating in Soweto, Norma has little in common with black Sowetans and resists assimilation. When the unfortunate Solomzi is killed in a car accident she returns to America, where she gives birth to his child. His death is in effect laid at her door ("She drives me like a slave. . . Sometimes I'm so tired I'm almost asleep behind the wheel" (143)). While the story may satirise this uncritical (and superficial) adoption of black American slogans and fashions, it seems to endorse the Aunt Bessie's verdict on Norma: "And to imagine that we once thought she was as human as you and me!" (144). We are not encouraged to question the ethos of the culture into which she was expected to assimilate, and she is allowed no space in which to express her own feelings or articulate her own point of view. It seems, then, that Mzamane may (consciously or

²⁸ Roughly translated, "That girl has Sol by the cock".

unconsciously) be perpetuating some of the more questionable elements of the urban African culture celebrated by the *Drum* writers, namely its sexism and male chauvinism.

“The Soweto Bride” is in fact a more interesting text than the foregoing discussion might suggest. It reveals that what the narrator refers to as “our culture” is in fact a hybrid culture, the various elements of which sometimes coexist rather uneasily. The more traditional elements are in evidence at the ceremony held at the parents’ home to welcome the married couple back from America. When they arrive in a new black Cadillac convertible, ululating relatives burst out of the house and shower them with confetti made from discarded fahfee exercise books. Phambili is allowed inside, while the others sit outside in the tent where women have begun singing wedding songs. (129). Women enter to shake hands and enquire after the bride’s health. When Phambili hints that the narrator does not speak Xhosa, they switch to Sesotho. Meanwhile the mother has been weeping “tears of gratitude” at the discovery that the *makoti* is in fact black! When a woman dressed in the uniform of the Methodist Mothers’ *umanyano* bursts into an impromptu hymn, the whole house joins in. “Torn between self-respect and my instinctive response, I hummed the baritone part as audibly as I could but with my mouth firmly shut to create the illusion that I was silent” (130-1). The narrator negotiates his conflicted position by both participating (through his humming) *and* keeping a distance and preserving decorum (by appearing to be silent): ““What will the American think of us?’ I kept on saying to myself” (131). Embarrassed by the endless “speechifying”, he excuses himself and retires early. Far from invoking, in any simple, essentialist sense, “African” or “black” cultural values, this episode dramatises the tensions which exist within the black community, and in particular between its more upwardly mobile members and ordinary working class people. Throughout the party that evening Phambili is anxious to demonstrate that, like Solomzi, he is a man of “good breeding and education” (133). He is proud that the event has an “international flavour”, is obsequious towards Mr Sixishe, the Mayor, and shows off Kedibone, who in her “hot pants and halter neck” is a definite asset (134). When it is his turn to speak as Master of Ceremonies, he invites the guests to “partake of the waters of immortality and the other delicacies set before them” (133). At moments like this it does seem likely that the narrator’s conduct and values *are* being deliberately satirised. The passage invites comparison to Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease*, which also deals with a young member of the new elite

caught in a situation of cultural conflict. (At one point Kedibone in fact quotes from Achebe's novel.) But while Achebe is clearly satirising the values, manners and life style of the new Nigerian elite, Mzamane's intention is less clear-cut. This stems from our difficulty in separating the norms and values of the first-person narrator from those of the implied author.

In her reading of these stories, Barnett resolves this problem by deciding that "the young man who sees himself as a man of the world is one of Mzamane's favourite objects of fun. He is the narrator in 'The Soweto Bride' and again in 'A Present for my Wife'" (209). Unfortunately she doesn't offer much support for this view. This reading differs from hers. The humour that is a feature of these stories depends for its effect on a willing suspension of critical judgement on the part of the reader; is one laughing with, or at, the protagonist/narrator? According to Naidoo (and contrary to Barnett), we are in fact "encouraged to admire [the narrator's] wit, his resilience, his charming male cunning" (59). Not surprisingly, Laretta Ngcobo is sharply critical of Mzamane in her paper entitled "Images of Women in South African Black Literature". She discusses Mzamane's demeaning representation of women, but does not explore the attitudes and assumptions that underpin the stories and are seemingly embodied in and articulated by their narrators.²⁹

In his more recent critical writings Mzamane adopts a progressive, non-sexist position. He begins a paper entitled "Gender Politics and the Unfolding Culture of Literation in South Africa" by acknowledging that "sexism is deeply embedded in our patriarchal society" (1). He comments wryly that "patriarchy is one of the few truly non-racial institutions in South African society" (4), and argues that "sexism needs to be confronted. . . wherever it is encountered, at every layer of society, by both men and women" (6). While these remarks are exemplary, they do not, of course, solve our problem as readers of his stories. (Mzamane's earlier critical articles are silent on gender issues.) Sexism *is* clearly deeply embedded in the culture which is represented in *Mzala*, but the stories do not seem designed to critique or subvert this. Figures like Mzala, Phambili, Solomzi, Yster, and Samoosa seem in fact to exemplify the sexist and pleasure-directed behaviour of members of a male-centred society. Excessive drinking is the norm: "Beer and spirits flowed like *ndambula* at the municipal beer

²⁹ According to Ngcobo, as she worked on her paper (which also discusses Mphahlele and Ndebele) "[her] eyes opened wide and [she] was horrified." She continues: "Then I thought, how can I attack these writers, Mzamane in particular; I like him so much – he's another gentle person" ("Interview" 95).

hall, until blackout had claimed a considerable portion of our company, including myself” (138). Yster, whom Mzamane invites us to admire in his “Introduction” (as one of the “heroes of continuance” (xi)) is “an irrepressible gatecrasher with a radar for liquor” who intones endlessly, “‘*Ons het ge-groove, Jack*’” (“The Soweto Bride” 132). Is he in fact anything more than a party animal? It is perhaps salutary to recall that the beerhalls and shebeens were among the first targets of students during the 1976 Soweto uprising.

It is striking that while there is a superficial echoing of American Black Power slogans, there is no evidence in the stories of the existence of the home-grown variety of Black Consciousness which contributed so significantly to the politicisation of the youth and the events of 1976. According to Trump,

Mzamane’s stories form part of that central stream of works by black writers which sets out to extol values in the black community rather than castigate this community for some of its weaknesses. There is no doubt that Mzamane’s commitment at the time of writing these stories to the Black Consciousness movement informs this vision . . .
(‘Black South African Short Fiction’ 52).

Naidoo seems to agree: “The sustaining of a collective black consciousness is the primary topos that informs *Mzala*” (44). These critics are, it seems, taking their lead from Mzamane’s own (stated) political commitments (post-1976). Perhaps they are unduly impressed by the rhetorical flourish with which Mzamane concludes his Introduction to *Mzala*: “POWER TO THE PEOPLE! AMANDLA!” (xii). Far from endorsing “black” cultural values or asserting a collective black identity, these stories in fact reveal the fractures and tensions within the so-called black community – in particular differences based on class, gender, ethnicity, nationality and the rural/urban divide. In this respect Mzamane’s stories differ fundamentally from those of a writer like Matshoba. The stories in *Call Me Not a Man* (1979) have an obvious politicising and conscientising function, and clearly reflect a Black Consciousness ethos.

Mzamane likes to refer to the culture of “[his] people” as “an unfolding culture of liberation” (“Cultivating a People’s Voice” 60, 61) In his more recent criticism he also points out that there are “regressive” as well as “progressive” strains in the culture of “the historically disadvantaged”. It would seem that in the stories in *Mzala* both strains are evident. The 1976 Soweto uprising represented a turning point for Mzamane. Writing in *Momentum* he states that for some time after his

“apprenticeship” as a writer, his commitment remained “quite ambiguous” (301). He also refers to the obvious risks run by any black writer who seemed to question the status quo and continues: “Despite what I now perceive as some valuable elements in my early work, I was always painfully aware of a groping, of something lacking in my work, the absence of an ideological framework . . .” (302). In his Introduction to *Mzala* he says that he only writes “when the spirit moves him” and he describes the organic way in which a story takes shape in his imagination (viii). It would seem that his first collection of stories reflects the freedom he then felt to give expression in his writing to vitality and individuality wherever he encountered it. This very artistic freedom – unfettered by the constraints of political correctness or conformity – is what makes the writing in *Mzala* so lively and so vital. These qualities are present only intermittently in his later, more politically committed work, where Black Consciousness and the liberation struggle provide the “ideological framework” that was absent earlier. In his later stories Mzamane’s heroes are the young students whose actions helped to change the political landscape of the country, and his project becomes one of recording or documenting their experience in thinly fictionalised terms. *The Children of Soweto* (1982) telescopes the events of several months in 1976 into one week, and *Children of the Diaspora* traces the fortunes of this generation of young activists in exile. In the post-1976 climate it would have been very difficult for a black writer to avoid taking a politically committed stance. Mzamane has clearly taken to heart his own injunction: “The poets, in the service of the revolution, have the function of articulating the people’s aspirations, sustaining their spirits and generally working in line with the revolutionary movements” (“Literature and Politics amongst Blacks in South Africa” 55). He argues that “revolutionary poets do not feel stifled by this” (55), but the evidence of his own work suggests otherwise. In his discussion of the post-Soweto novel, Mzamane argues that in these works (and he cites *The Children of Soweto* as an example) “collective concerns triumph over purely personal aspirations” (“Cultivating a People’s Voice” 66). In his later work there may be a gain in terms of political commitment, but there is also a loss in terms of the vitality and interest of the writing.³⁰ It would seem that within the work of this one writer one can trace a shift from one mode of writing, that associated with *Drum* and the 1950s, to another, that associated with *Staffrider* and the 1970s and 1980s.

³⁰ In addition, Mzamane is himself now writing from exile, and this inevitably removes him from immediate contact with the sources which had nourished his earlier fiction.

CHAPTER 8: *STAFFRIDER* AND THE SHORT STORY

THE CULTURAL SCENE

The preceding discussion of the Black Consciousness movement helps to explain its impact in South Africa in the 1970s. Its significance can hardly be underestimated: according to Mzamane, “Before the rise of the writers and artists of the Black Consciousness era, most of whom had been in their early teens during the Sharpeville crisis, there was as much stagnation on the cultural scene in South Africa as there was on the political front” (“The Impact of Black Consciousness” 180). Mzamane traces the beginnings of a literary revival in the late-1960s to the small group of writers, artists and musicians who remained in the country and helped keep “an unfolding culture of liberation alive” (181). They included such well-known figures as Abdullah Ibrahim (who subsequently went into exile), Kippie Moeketsi, Mankunku Ngozi, the Malombo Jazzmakers, Abigail Kubheka, Sophie Mgcina and Dumile Feni. It will be noted that the list consists mainly of musicians and singers; there were very few active black writers left in the country in the mid-60s. Nevertheless the presence of these artists in the country helped to promote the cultural renaissance which is expressed in the early poetry of Mongane Serote and other black poets of the 1970s.

From 1968 a number of literary magazines (*Contrast*, *New Coin*, *Ophir*, *Bolt*, *Izwi*, the *Classic*) started to publish poems by black writers, including Dollar Brand (Abdullah Ibrahim), Serote, Mtshali, Motjuwadi, Mbuli, Ndebele and Gwala. Most of these magazines (with the possible exception of the *Classic*, which appeared intermittently through the 60s) circulated among a relatively small group of predominantly white readers, and had little or no impact in the townships.¹ In an article published in *New Classic* in 1976 (but based on a paper given a year or two earlier), Sepamla laments the absence of publishing opportunities and the lack of supportive literary magazines, and paints a bleak picture of the situation of the black writer: “A problem that wears us down . . . is *lack of publishers and outlets*. . . . There is not a single black publisher I know of in this country. . . . I know of no magazine today which is prepared to give an unknown, unheard-of black writer a chance” (“The Black Writer in South Africa” 119). He explains that it is for this reason that he wants

¹ Lionel Abrahams gives an account of this emerging black poetry in “Black Experience into English Verse” (1970), reprinted in *Soweto Poetry* (edited by Chapman), 137 -143.

to “move mountains” to start a new magazine that will be receptive to the work of black writers (he is referring to *New Classic*, the magazine which he revived and edited). One must, however, give recognition where it is due: it was Renoster Books which published Mtshali’s *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* in 1971 and Serote’s *Yakhal’inkomo* in 1972, Sprocas-Ravan which published Matthews’s and Thomas’s *Cry Rage!* in 1972 and Ad Donker which published *To Whom it May Concern* in 1973. The publication of these volumes gave impetus to the revival of black poetry in South Africa, and helped to popularise the work of these writers in the townships.² Even though the market for these pioneering collections was mainly white and middle-class, they were (with the possible exception of Mtshali’s *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*) clearly geared to consumption by a black audience, and the success and repute of these authors filtered through to township groups.

At the time Sepamla was writing his paper, a cultural renaissance was under way in townships across South Africa. This was largely driven by the Black Consciousness movement, and disseminated initially through SASO and its newsletters. This new wave of writing was also influenced by political developments, in particular the wave of strike action that took hold in Durban in 1973, the collapse of colonial rule in Angola and Mozambique in 1974, and the pro-Frelimo rallies planned for September 1974. From mid-1972 the newly formed Black People’s Convention, working together with SASO, started to organise leadership training seminars for high school and youth groups in the townships. This led to the formation of the National Youth Organisation (NAYO) in May 1973, and in 1974 youth groups in the Transvaal (particularly in Soweto) combined to form the South African Students’ Movement (SASM) (Karis and Gerhart 123-24). Gerhart notes that the performance of black drama and music by “mushrooming township groups” had become “a significant factor in the diffusion of Black Consciousness ideology” (299). This new generation of young black writers and performers was not interested in white patronage, however well-meaning. “Independence in drama, art, music and literature was a logical corollary to SASO’s call for blacks to go it alone politically. Almost all black artists

² According to Serote, when *Yakhal’inkomo* came out he was “showered with praise” in the township. He also admits to being “dead scared”: “I had just come out of prison, out of nine months of solitary confinement, and I was keenly aware of the violence the South African government had in store for us.” He knew that if he was to continue to write poetry, “there was no way [he] could go on as if [he] was not aware that there is solitary confinement, torture and death” (“Interview” 113). He seems to have had no expectation that his use of poetry as means of expression would protect him from the attentions of the censor or the security police.

and performers functioned in the shadow of whites who stood as gatekeepers to the wider public” (Karis and Gerhart 134). Among the more prominent of these groups were The Theatre Council of Natal (TECON), whose members included Strini Moodley and Saths Cooper, and (in Johannesburg) the Music, Dance, Art, Literature Institute (MDALI) – the latter formed with the express aim of “liberating the mental and creative processes” of black artists (Karis and Gerhart 134). “Dozens of new groups devoted to black music, drama, and poetry sprang up in townships across the country” (Karis and Gerhart 135).³ The literary products of these groups reflected a new, uncompromising militancy and a new political explicitness: “Ultimately, to merit the label black . . . a performance, poem or work of art had to convey a political message, either veiled or explicit. . . . Poetry reading, usually combined with performances by musical groups, stressed political themes and openly referred to revolutionary goals” (Karis and Gerhart 135).

One outcome of this literary resurgence is that for the first time performance-oriented poetry takes centre stage, and literary forms like the short story seem to be eclipsed. How does one account for this sudden emergence of poetry as a preferred literary form? Several answers have been advanced.⁴ One answer is that, being a rather more cryptic or less explicit form of literary expression, poetry might be less likely to attract the attention of the censors. According to Gordimer: “Out of this paralytic silence . . . has come the black writer’s subconscious search for a form less vulnerable than those that led a previous generation into bannings and exile” (*The Black Interpreters* 52). The problem with this view – as Rive points out – is that much of this new black poetry was very explicit: “The actual writing proved to be as overt and straightforward as Protest short stories had been” (“Books by Black Writers” 14). The banning of the James Matthews’s and Gladys Thomas’s *Cry Rage!* (1972) is a case in point.⁵ Rive points to what is perhaps a more likely reason for this turn to poetry, namely “the sensational success of the first collection to emerge, Oswald Mtshali’s *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* in 1971” (14). In an interview published in *Contrast* in 1977, Sepamla endorses this view. Many aspiring writers, he says, were seized by the desire to emulate Mtshali and Serote [and also Matthews]: “‘a lot of the

³ See also Sole, “Authority, Authenticity and the Black Writer” (86-87, 89-91).

⁴ Mzamane offers a summary in “The Impact of Black Consciousness on Culture” (184-85).

⁵ This was the first book of poetry to be banned under the Publications Act. Matthews in fact refers to his and Gladys Thomas’s poems as “declarations”, and states: “To label my utterings poetry/and myself a poet/would be as self-deluding/ as the planners of parallel development” (*Cry Rage!* 70).

people who are writing today saw them; talked to them; they know their experience and they know how they translated their experiences into poetry” (cited by Mzamane, “Impact of Black Consciousness” 184). One might add that some of the reasons advanced for the popularity of the short story form – namely its immediacy and its brevity – apply even more obviously to poetry. The highly charged political climate of the early 1970s and the powerful emotive and intellectual appeal of Black Consciousness may also help to explain the turn to a style of poetry which lends itself to oral performance. Of all literary forms, poetry is also the easiest to commit to memory: poems could circulate orally in the townships, thereby evading the attention of the censors.⁶ Poetry employs all the resources of language, including rhythm and repetition, and resonates more directly with orature (in particular, the tradition of the *isibongo* or praise poem). In combination, these factors help to explain why poetry should have become the favoured medium for literary expression in the early 1970s.

Mutloatse, in his Introduction to *Reconstruction*, provides an insight into the assumptions and practices which inform what he calls “the Participatory Literature of Liberation”:

This Participatory Literature of Liberation demands more than just listening to or reading a book or poem: it demands, too, the absolute involvement of the reader/listener all the time, so that in the end the thin line dividing artist from audience disappears, since ours is a culture that does not isolate in us the experience of any facet of our lives, be it death or birth. All these activities involve the whole community. . . . Every story written, every poem that is recited, is like the birth of another black child, and for this the community is called upon to do its traditional thing: participate. *Ululae; fiyile; fiyela Mandela: Azania!*

(“Introduction” 6)

These factors also help to explain the turn towards “township theatre” or “resistance theatre” in the 1970s and early 1980s: theatre engages a live audience in the most direct way possible, and can be a powerful vehicle for communicating a political message. According to Kavanagh,

⁶ When Ingoapele Madingoane’s epic poem, *Africa my Beginning*, was finally published by Ravan Press in 1979, it was immediately banned – but it was already well-known in Soweto as a result of its frequent performance at poetry readings. Among the reasons given for its banning were the references to Hector (Peterson) and Steve Biko, its invocation of ancestral help in the freedom struggle, and its prediction of liberation for Namibia and “Azania”. Msimang offers a detailed discussion of the poem in Chapman’s *Soweto Poetry* (204-212).

“Meaning was communicated either in polemical speeches directed at the audience or in strong harsh images To a large extent, such a form emerged organically from the relation of the audience to the performers. . . . They were angry members of a wronged community talking directly to others of that community about their common oppression.

(166)

Among the advantages of this kind of theatre, geared as it was to a one-night stand in a makeshift township venue, are that it is cheap, mobile, simple to present and difficult to supervise, censor or outlaw (Mzamane, “Impact of Black Consciousness” 186). Mzamane also points out that (like poetry) it taps into traditional performance practices. *Shanti*, a groundbreaking play by Mthuli Shezi, was performed by townships in Natal and the Transvaal in 1973.⁷ Mzamane points to the impact of the new, highly charged political climate on the popular township theatre of Gibson Kente: his plays *How Long, I Believe* and *Too Late* “carried a message of defiance and anger to the urban masses”. He suggests that “the accumulated effect of such theatre activity” helped to prepare the way for the Soweto uprising of June 1976 (“Impact of Black Consciousness” 187).

STAFFRIDER

The advent of *Staffrider* in 1978 provided the various cultural and writers’ groups operating in the townships with a publication outlet, and one that they felt they could take ownership of. The editorial note in the first number states that the magazine “has been established by Ravan Press in an attempt to respond, as publishers, to the great surge of creative activity which has been one of the more hopeful signs of recent times” (“About *Staffrider* 125). The idea for the magazine originated in a discussion in 1977 between Mike Kirkwood and a group of writers in Mpumalanga (Hammarisdale), one of whom was Mafika Gwala. “Nobody wanted the kind of editorial policy that comes from the top. They wanted a magazine that was generated at the point of writing and functioned as a vehicle for a great number of writers” (Kirkwood, “*Staffrider*: An Informal Discussion” 22). When Kirkwood joined Ravan Press in 1988, he pursued this idea, together with Muthobi Mutloatse – “the one

⁷ Karis and Gerhart note that it tells “the improbable but politically instructive story of an Indian woman whose African lover flees South Africa to join the guerilla army of Frelimo” (135).

person without whom there would have been no *Staffrider*" (Kirkwood, "Remembering *Staffrider* 5). It was Mutloatse who came up with the name *Staffrider* (a reference to the daring youths who rode "staff" on the crowded township trains). A staffrider is "a skelm of sorts . . . a skilful entertainer, a bringer of messages, a useful person but . . . slightly disreputable" ("About *Staffrider*" 125). Like him or not, the editorial suggests, we need to listen to him: "A whole new literature is knocking at the door, and if our society is to change without falling apart it needs all the messages it can get – the bad as well as the good" (125).⁸

The editorial also sets out their rather unusual editorial policy:

The new writing has altered the scope and function of literature in South Africa in ways we still have to discover. The aim of this magazine is not to impose 'standards' but to provide a regular meeting place for the new writers and their readers, a forum which will help to shape the future of our literature.

A feature of much of the new writing is its "direct line" to the community in which the writer lives. This is a two-way line. The writer is attempting to voice the community's experience ("This is how it is") and his immediate audience is the community ("Am I right?"). Community drama, "say" poetry, an oral literature backed and inspired by music: this is the heart of the new writing, and the signs are that the prose forms are re-emerging in a new mould.

("About *Staffrider*" 125)

Kirkwood adds, "We hope the work appearing in the magazine will be selected and edited as far as possible by the groups themselves. The magazine has . . . no editor or editorial board in the usual sense" (125). They would, however (in an attempt to avoid racial exclusivity?) also accept work from "unattached individuals" who found the *Staffrider* environment "congenial" (125). The effect, as Gqola points out, was to blur the distinction between writer and reader, and to emphasise the authority of "the black experience" (32).

The effect was dramatic: not since *Drum* in the 1950s had there been such an infusion of life and energy into the black South African literary scene. According to Kirkwood, "filling the first issue was simply a matter of contacting the various writers' groups around the country" – material "flooded in" ("An Informal

⁸ The male pronoun is invariably used with reference to the Staffrider figure. The poem "Staffrider" refers to its subject as a "Black Boy" (*Staffrider* 1, 1 (28)).

Discussion” 25).⁹ The style and informing ideology of the two publications could hardly be more different. *Drum* was a popular, sensational, mass-circulation magazine which managed to tap into the needs, interests and energies of an (often) newly urbanised black working class; it celebrated individuality and pandered to popular taste, and it survived on sales and advertising. *Staffrider* downplayed individuality (although traces of this survive in the Staffrider figure)¹⁰ and emphasized the collective, “the new literature based on communities” (“About *Staffrider*” 125). It was informed by a blend of Black Consciousness and leftist ideology.¹¹ Vaughan summarises the dominant ideological strain as follows: “Black Consciousness provided the dominant ideological basis for an emphasis upon unity-in-oppression, for the assertion of ‘black’ cultural values, and for a militant expression of ‘black’ political aspiration” (“*Staffrider* and South African Literature” 196). He sees its “populism” as an outcome of its assertion of a generic black identity: “The category of the generic, the mass, the people is implicitly evoked by reference to blackness” (197). *Staffrider* did not seek (and was not supported by) advertisers, and relied for both its material and its distribution on township networks.¹² While *Drum* covered political events (the Defiance Campaign, the Treason Trial, the formation of the PAC) and thrived on the interest generated by its exposés (into prison conditions or farm labour) it avoided confrontation and reined in its reporters when necessary. *Staffrider* relied on the support of a new constituency, the newly politicised youth and young adults of the townships. While *Drum* implicitly endorsed the politics of protest, *Staffrider* clearly endorsed the new politics of resistance. The pivotal event here was of course the Soweto uprising of 1976.

Pictorially, and in terms of layout and design, the two magazines could not have been more different. An obvious feature of *Drum* was the (often titillating) cover photos of a young black women, sometimes in bathing suits (the cover picture

⁹ He contrasts this with the short story competitions run by *Drum* which attracted hundreds of entries from individuals around Africa.

¹⁰ “It incorporated the notion of a daredevil, somebody who would go a little bit further than most” (Kirkwood, “An Informal Discussion” 23).

¹¹ While Kirkwood says that “from the start it was to be non-racial”, he also says: “Mothobi and I, from our earliest discussions onwards, had worked on the assumption that the kind of experience that was going to be turned into literature in the period we were moving into was going to be black experience in the main” (“An Informal Discussion” 23).

¹² Kirkwood explains that “when you talk about *Staffrider* you’re talking about approximately 500 writers, not to speak of graphic artists, who both help to put the magazine together and, perhaps, more important, help to distribute it. All the people who have had anything to do with the magazine see it, and would like to continue seeing it, as something for which no particular individual is directly responsible” (“An Informal Discussion” 25).

of Dolly Rathebe posing in a bikini on mine dump is an iconic example). Extensive use was made of photographs as an adjunct to news stories. In contrast, the cover photographs of *Staffrider* were selected primarily for their political resonance. Both Vaughan and Kirkwood have written insightful analyses of the cover of the first issue of *Staffrider*, which features a black youth in the act of clearing a barbed wire barricade – clearly emblematic of the “Staffrider” figure (Vaughan, “*Staffrider* and South African Literature 198; Kirkwood, “Remembering *Staffrider*” 2). Vaughan also comments on *Staffrider*’s “mosaic-like layout” and its “non-systematic” dispersal of different literary genres, and on its use of the contributions of a group or region as organising principle – all of which served to “promote an image of the magazine as a collective enterprise” (“*Staffrider* and South African Literature” 200).¹³ Kirkwood in fact comments on the distinction between *Drum* and *Staffrider*, and turns the absence of continuity into a virtue:

Although there were a variety of incidental links between *Drum* and *Staffrider* when we started . . . it was certainly not in our minds to continue the tradition of *Drum*. The cultural history of South Africa is best represented as a heap of fragments which are cut off from each other; this is true of white culture, but even more true of black culture, where each generation seems to have been lopped off, stopped in its tracks, by exile, imprisonment or some form of cultural oppression or another imposed by the ruling cultural group. Each new generation has to start from scratch. . . . Given this enforced absence of continuity from generation to generation, there are positive aspects to be drawn from such a cultural dispensation. There’s a pride in each new generation that comes from the endeavour made by the new cultural activists. There’s also a degree of resistance to continuity: the writers don’t want to be told over and over again that they must realise they are part of a tradition. They don’t want to be hemmed in by tradition; they want to draw attention to the validity of cultural action in the present.

(“An Informal Discussion” 24)

Not everyone was as sanguine. In Van Wyk’s view, this break in continuity meant “the absence of literary references . . . against which young writers could measure their work” (*Staffrider* and the Politics of Culture” 168). This may help to explain why he regards much of the writing that developed out of June 16 as “inadequate” (168).

¹³ In contrast, *Drum* would run annual short story competitions and focus on individual prize-winning authors (the first prize-winner was, of course, Can Themba, a supreme individualist).

Staffrider's use of non-commercial outlets also becomes a virtue in Kirkwood's eyes: "The whole black readership in this country operates largely outside the normal channels of bookshops. And, from the beginning, *Staffrider* has been trying to express the cultural force that rests outside the institutional framework" ("An Informal Discussion" 26).¹⁴ The downside of the comparison is that *Drum* sold up to 70 000 copies,¹⁵ whereas *Staffrider's* print run (in 1980) was 7000.¹⁶ In both cases, however, copies of the magazine would pass from hand to hand, so that actual number of readers would be much greater than the copies printed.

Staffrider was obviously a new phenomenon in the literary and cultural history of this country. It represented a decisive break with the more familiar (Western) paradigm of the writer as gifted individual whose work expresses his or her unique insight – and who (almost necessarily) works alone.¹⁷ One outcome of *Staffrider's* success was the *Staffrider* series published by Raven Press. This featured writers who had come to attention through *Staffrider* (such as Matshoba) or slightly older writers with established careers whose publication in *Staffrider* brought increased readership and renewed attention (such as Miriam Tlali). By 1988 there were 28 titles in the *Staffrider* series, which reads rather like a roll-call of the foremost writers of the time. Included in the list are collections of short stories by Matshoba, Mzamane, Mphahlele, Mutloatse, Matthews and Ndebele; novels by Dangor (a novella, *Waiting for Leila*), and Serote; collections of poetry by Madingoane, Soyinka, Kunene, Gwala, Dikobe, Dangor and Cronin; a play by Matshoba (*Seeds of War*) and collections of the work of Can Themba and Nat Nakasa. This points to the crucial role played by Raven Press in fostering and publishing the work of a new generation of (mainly) black South African writers.

By the time of Kirkwood's interview with Visser (September 1980), the momentum which had sustained *Staffrider* for its first two years was beginning to wane, perhaps as a result of the lowered political temperature and the effect of the

¹⁴ By the time of Kirkwood's retrospective "Remembering *Staffrider*" (1988), this had changed: the informal distribution networks had "run down" and the magazine now relied on commercial outlets (CNA) and the efforts of individuals who sold consignments and received a commission (6).

¹⁵ According to Sampson, after the *Drum* exposé of prison conditions ("Mr Drum goes to Jail") their circulation in South Africa rose to 70 000 (*Drum* 198).

¹⁶ At its zenith it touched 10 000 ("Remembering *Staffrider* 3).

¹⁷ Vaughan points out that in the liberal tradition "the category of 'the individual' was central, and literary themes were mediated by a concern with sensitively *individualized* experiences and interactions" ("*Staffrider* and South African Literature 197).

bannings of October 1977.¹⁸ According to Kirkwood, many people who were originally members of writers' groups were now submitting work as individuals. They were in effect having to decide whether they were writers because they were part of a collective engaged in "cultural struggle", or whether they were writers because they were interested in and committed to writing ("Am I a writer because I am a writer?" (Kirkwood 25)). This shift from collective to individual publication coincides with Chris van Wyk's editorship of *Staffrider* for six years in the 1980s. He notes two significant changes during this period. The first is an ideological shift in response to the emergence of new political and cultural perspectives during the 1980s (largely a result of the founding of the United Democratic Front in 1983). This entailed a reassertion of the non-racial "Charterist" tradition of the ANC, and sprang from a new grassroots activism on the part of community organisations operating in a number of fields (housing, education, women's and youth organisations, etc). The second change relates to editorial method and policy. Van Wyk had never supported the original "self-editing" policy, and with the waning of writers' groups in the townships he insisted that "a system of literary merit" be adopted ("*Staffrider* and the Politics of Culture" 166-67). In his 1980 interview Kirkwood in fact acknowledges the pressure to apply some kind of quality control (given the impossibility of publishing every contribution): "New writing which isn't quite as impressive may get short shrift" ("An Informal Discussion" 31). He did not, however, want the magazine to become "the vehicle of a particular clique of writers" (31). He accepts that the magazine was operating within "a particular transitional culture", and that *Staffrider* may have to "fade away gracefully" in time (31).

Sepamla's article on his experience as editor of *New Classic* ("A Note on *New Classic* and S'ketsh") makes – by comparison – quite poignant reading. In spite of his status as one of the "Soweto poets", Sepamla belonged to an older school of writing, one that took its bearings from the *Drum* writers of the 50s and the 60s. *New Classic* was, as the title suggests, a revival of Nat Nakasa's *Classic*, which had finally ceased publication in 1971. Sepamla's rather bleak account of the situation of the black writer in the mid-70s has already been referred to. In his "Note" he refers to his

¹⁸ Following the death of Steve Biko in detention, a number of organizations were declared unlawful on 17 October 1977. These included SASO, the BPC, the SSRC, SASM, NYO, the Black Parents' Association, the Christian Institute and the Medupe Writers' Association. Two publications, the newspaper *The World*, and the Christian Institute's *Pro Veritate*, were also banned (Karis and Gerhart 315-16).

determination to “fill the gap” by starting a new journal for “budding writers” (81). Lionel Abrahams suggested that he “pick up the scattered remains of the *Classic*” (81).¹⁹ Sepamla was an admirer of “the kind of writing” published in the *Classic*, and he saw its revival as “the continuation of some tradition” (81). He recruited a Board of Trustees and approached the Anglo-American Chairman’s Fund for initial funding,²⁰ which they granted. Sepamla also took over the editorship of *S’ketch*, the theatre magazine founded by Robert McLaren (Mshengu) – and also funded by Anglo-American. Sepamla confesses to being uncomfortable with the post-1976 “radicalism” of the youth, but singles out Mbulelo Mzamane and Njabulo Ndebele as two people who gave him valuable support. They also encouraged him in his stance of “insisting on certain standards” (in contrast to the yet-to-be-founded *Staffrider*). It would give priority to contributions which reflected the “black man’s life” in South Africa – something that he felt was consistent with “the tradition of the founding fathers of the magazine” (83).

He describes in some detail the difficulties he faced:

To edit a magazine aimed at a black readership in this country is an exercise in futility. Quite a number of people want to be published. The problem was always how to let their work reach me. [He details various forms of police harassment.] The print order for a literary magazine is a source of agonising moments. One must take account of the number of buyers, the possibility of the number being banned before the actual costs of bringing out that number have been recovered, and the mode of distributing the ordered quantity.
(“Note” 83)

After the October 1977 bannings at least a dozen of his contacts fled the country. He describes the difficulties of relying on person-to-person distribution in the townships, and the magnitude of his task as editor:

I had to edit, do the layout, type handwritten scripts, pester the printers, distribute copies to contacts and bookshops, address envelopes to subscribers, stamp and seal them, answer queries and other letters from interested parties, collect monies from those who managed to sell, keep proper books for auditing, and keep track of copies from stock.

¹⁹ Lionel Abrahams was, among other things, the editor of *The Purple Renoster* (a literary magazine) and a founder of Renoster Books, which published Mtshali’s and Serote’s first collections of poetry.

²⁰ This was to result in the accusation (from overseas) that he was working with “capitalist exploiters” and in the threat to dump the 300 copies of *New Classic* he had sent over into the river Thames! (82).

(“Note” 84)

Not surprisingly, he often felt like “[throwing] in the towel” (84). He concludes by lamenting the effects of censorship and of Bantu education (many of his contributors, he felt, lacked fluency in English).

Clearly the political and cultural climate (particularly after June 1976) did not favour the survival of a traditional literary magazine which solicited contributions from individuals and relied on a combination of person-to-person sales and distribution via selected bookshops. The *New Classic* failed to tap into the literary renaissance that was taking place in the townships, and its editor – in spite of his almost single-handed efforts – seems to have been out of step with the politically radicalised youth and the collectivist ethos of the writers’ groups in the townships. Sepamla’s pessimism is in stark contrast to Kirkwood’s assurance and optimism as he assesses the achievements of *Staffrider* in its first few years. This assurance is echoed by the editors of the tenth anniversary edition of *Staffrider* in 1988, who describe *Staffrider* as “one of the most successful cultural journals ever published in this country” (Oliphant and Vladislavic i). They base this estimate not only on the “wide readership” of the magazine, but also on “the significance of the work [it] has published, [its] relationship to political and historical developments in South Africa, and its resilience and adaptability in an extremely hostile and repressive environment” (i). They single out for praise *Staffrider*’s “non-elitist orientation” and its (related) ability to provide an outlet for the work of “young and often inexperienced writers” and for the work of “community-based projects” (i). One of its achievements was to “exert pressure on institutionalised notions of writing as well as the rigid demarcations between genres and modes” (ii). They also claim (perhaps less convincingly) that the magazine published work “from across the entire spectrum” (ii). They refer to the journal’s “self-editing phase” and acknowledge that this had been replaced by a “more rigorous selection process, coupled with criticism and workshop discussion” (ii).

It is nevertheless true that, as Visser argues, the *Staffrider* that emerged after ten years in a new format (that of a journal rather than a magazine) was a rather different kind of animal from the original “skelm” (“A Skelm no Longer” 40, 45). He also points out that the layout and organisation of the 1988 anniversary issue fails to reflect its original “collective and populist enterprise” (40). Furthermore, while the

early *Staffrider* was “an exciting jumble of verse, graphics, stories, interviews, photography, reviews, tips to apprentice writers and so on”, the 1988 anthology uses the conventional genre categories to organise its material. This suggests a reversion to more familiar or conventional notions of literature and literary production.

MTUTUZELI MATSHOBA

This examination of post-1976 fiction will focus on the work of two writers who were both closely associated with *Staffwriter*.²¹ It is through the publication of his stories in *Staffrider* that Matshoba comes to prominence as a writer, attracts a reading public, and gains critical notice.²² His stories encapsulate many of the features of the black short story as it re-emerges post-1976 as an important genre of black writing. Miriam Tlali’s early career preceded the events of 1976, but her subsequent work was profoundly influenced by these events. She is the first black woman writer (writing from within the country) to make an impact as a short story writer, a genre previously dominated almost exclusively by men.²³ The work of both writers clearly reveals the impact of Black Consciousness, but gender plays a crucial role in defining and differentiating their responses to this movement and to the new post-1976 political situation.

Since Matshoba’s stories draw directly on his own life experience (in a manner which is so far without precedent in the black short story), one needs to look closely at the information provided in his “Autobiographical Note” to *Call me not a Man* (henceforth *Call*). He was born in 1950 in “the early Soweto of Orlando (East and West), Shantytown, White City Jabavu, Pimville and Moroka” (vii). This precise notation of place is a feature of the stories that follow, which assume an insider’s knowledge of this vast and (to an outsider) sprawling and anonymous “township”.

²¹ No attempt is made at representivity (in a study of this scope space is an obvious constraint), although Matshoba’s work is broadly representative of the general trend of *Staffrider* writing. There are a number of interesting writers whose published work would otherwise need to be considered. These include Ahmed Essop, Bheki Maseko, Mthobeni Mutloatse and Jayapraga Reddy. Ndebele’s and Matlou’s short stories are considered in the next chapter.

²² According to Sole, Matshoba “was easily the most prominent, and most imitated, of [*Staffrider*’s] fiction writers” (“Political Fiction, Representation and the Canon” 102). This article draws on this thesis chapter, where Sole describes Matshoba’s stories as “seminal” (“Authority, Authenticity and the Black Writer” 197).

²³ This is partly because journalism was a profession dominated by men, and there are (as we have seen) intimate links between journalism and fictional writing by black South Africans. In the early 1930s we saw Dhlomo turning his hand to domestic dramas and romances exploring the dilemmas and life choices facing newly urbanized black woman; in the 1950s we see a few stories appearing in *Drum*, apparently by woman writers, but their names are in fact pseudonyms for black male writers!

Matshoba's consciousness has been shaped by Soweto: "Today's Soweto, the sprawling dirt- and vice-polluted giant matchbox city, was more or less my age when my environment began to register in my consciousness" (vii). The almost reflexive relationship to environment that we have seen in the black writers of the 1950s – encapsulated in Mphahlele's notion of the "tyranny of place" – continues with the *Staffrider* writers. Soweto is to the *Staffrider* writers what Sophiatown was to the *Drum* writers – but the contrast could hardly be starker: Soweto is an apartheid-era construct, a dormitory township consisting of rows of matchbox houses and hostels for migrant workers, over which the township authorities and the South African police could exert considerable control; Sophiatown was a relatively unsupervised inner-city community with its own unique identity.²⁴ In Chapman's words, "the flamboyance of Sophiatown gave way to the structural violence of the government regulated township, Soweto" (*Southern African Literatures* 371).

Matshoba tells us that in 1954 his parents finally got "their own matchbox house" at Mzimhlope, and he moved there with his parents and younger brother. He recalls his early impressions of the Sharpeville crisis, and states that from this time the slogan "Release Mandela" was imprinted on his mind (viii). He traces his own developing political awareness: "Later, with growth, I would ask and try to understand the *why* of it" (viii) – a process which his narratives re-enact. He is admitted to Fort Hare, where he encounters Steve Biko and other Black Consciousness leaders: "Fort Hare, across the Tyumie River from Lovedale, old adventurous friends, listening to Strini Moodley, Harry Nengwekhulu and Steve Biko talking, liquor parties, soccer, a strike and no return in the following year, '73. No regrets" (x). The university boycott of 1973 sees him back in Soweto. He returns to Fort Hare – until June 1976 disrupts his plans and turns him into a writer:

June 16, 1976 exploded in my face. Memories of old were revived, my life was so full that I knew that if I did not spill some of its contents out I would go berserk. I started scribbling and burning the scraps of paper on which I wrote, torn between writing or heading for the beckoning

²⁴ I take for granted some familiarity with that monument to apartheid social engineering, the segregated black township. John Kane-Berman provides an in-depth examination of Soweto in *Soweto: Black Revolt, White Reaction* (1978). He notes that "except from the top of the tallest building on a clear, unpolluted day, Soweto cannot be seen from Johannesburg. Out of sight on the far side of the 'buffer' zone required by apartheid policy, it was largely out of mind until the events of 16 June 1976 thrust it violently onto the front pages of newspapers all over the world (ix).

horizons, my country become my enemy.

(x)²⁵

For Matshoba, the impulse to write is inseparable from the political events which transformed his life and the lives of those around him. His aim is to reflect life on the “black side” of the fence (x). His writing will clearly be more than merely personal: it will amount to a testimony to the times he has lived through: “These were the events that shaped the Steve Bikos and the Solomon Mahlangu, and the many others who came before and after them” (x). For Matshoba, writing is more than a form of protest; it is, in effect, an extension of the political struggle. There is no tension or contradiction between his life as a writer and his life in politics – the one is an expression of the other.

The themes and characteristics of Matshoba’s short stories have been discussed by Vaughan, whose *Staffrider* article (“The Stories of Mtutuzeli Matshoba”) summarises a longer academic article (“Literature and Politics: Currents in South African Writing in the Seventies”). The following discussion draws on and responds to his account by examining three of the stories from *Call me not a Man*.

The opening paragraph of the title story, “Call me not a Man”, could almost have been written in response to Biko’s essay “We Blacks” (quoted previously). It is preceded by an epigraph:

*For neither am I a man in the eyes of the law,
Nor am I a man in the eyes of my fellow man.*

(18)

This sense of emasculation, of loss of manhood, of disempowerment haunts fiction by black male South Africans, and is a central motif in Matshoba’s collection. The opening paragraph spells out the evasions and humiliations which constitute the life of a black man in South Africa:

By dodging, lying, resisting where it is possible, bolting when I’m already cornered, parting with invaluable money, sometimes calling my sisters into the game to get amorous with my captors, allowing myself to be slapped on my mouth in front of my womenfolk and getting sworn at with my mother’s private parts, that component of me

²⁵ Compare Mzamane: “Then Soweto exploded in our faces. How could I continue along the subtle path when they were shooting my kid brothers and sisters openly in the streets, in broad daylight?” (*Momentum* 303)

which is man has died a thousand times in one lifetime. Only a shell of me remains to tell you of the other man's plight, which is in fact my own. For what is suffered by another man in view of my eyes is suffered also by me. The grief he knows is a grief that I know. Out of the same bitter cup do we drink, to the same chain gang do we belong.
(18)

The narrator's condition is a generic one, shared by all those who, like him, are black men. The story that follows reveals his empathy for others, but also his powerlessness. According to Biko, "the type of man we have today has lost his manhood. . . . All in all the black man has become a shell, a shadow of a man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity" ("We Blacks" 28-29). This is echoed by Matshoba in the above quotation. Matshoba's stories respond to Biko's diagnosis, and constitute an exploration of the predicament of the black man in apartheid South Africa; from this there emerges a recognition of the need for resistance.²⁶ According to Biko, the first step is "to pump life back into the empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity, to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of his birth" ("We Blacks" 29). This perspective supplies the "ideological framework" which (as we have seen) Mzamane felt was missing from his own first collection of stories (*Momentum* 302).

The opening paragraph of the title story directly addresses the reader, and amounts to a kind of choric lament; the reader is someone who, like the narrator, knows, understands and recognises the condition of enforced servitude ("To the same chain gang do we all belong"). These stories are clearly directed at Matshoba's fellow black countrymen – there is no appeal to the consciences of a putative white audience. The rhetoric is designed to focus attention on what is a collective plight, and one that, by implication, must be addressed collectively. The tone is angry, bitter, self-recriminatory.

The next paragraph makes a transition from the general condition to its specific manifestation – the predations of the police reservists who (a year after June 1976) are beginning to return "like a recurring pestilence". An obvious and distinctive feature of Matshoba's writing is his use of explicit commentary: this is a literature of indictment, with little attempt at subtlety or indirection. The narrator tells us that the

²⁶ The emphasis on "manhood" and the inclusive use of the term "man" are of course symptomatic of the blinkered approach of the early proponents of Black Consciousness to gender-related issues.

reservists “fleece the people right in the midst of their disgusting labour camps” (18). His contempt is obvious: “There are no greater thieves than these men of law, men of justice and volunteer public protectors” who “steal out in the open” (19). Clearly, this is a grotesque inversion of societal norms: those who should protect the public and preserve the peace act like predators. The imagery (“a wild cat” (20), “wolves” (20, 25), “a pack of hyenas” (25)) conveys the narrator’s anger and indignation at this perversion of justice. To make matters worse, these persecutors are themselves black; instead of acting in solidarity with their black brothers (and sisters), they collude with the oppressor. This is dramatised by the scene where a hapless *goduka* (a migrant labourer) is reduced to pleading with the two reservists who have targeted him:

“Oh, my brother. Put yourself in my shoes. I’ve not been home to my people for two years now. It’s the first chance I have to go and see my twin daughters who were born while I’ve been here. Feel for another poor black man, please, my good brother. Forgive me only for this once.” (23)

The protest writers of the 1950s and 1960s also protested against an oppressive and unjust system, and their (often implicit) appeal was also to the reader’s sense of justice or decency. This story differs in the explicitness of its commentary, and the directness with which the narrator expresses his anger and indignation. His intrusive commentary is the story’s dominant feature: it directs and guides the reader’s response at every turn. If scenic presentation is employed this is because the narrator is an eye-witness and can relay what happens to the reader: “A few feet above them, I could hear what was said” (23). There is nothing to distinguish the views of the narrator from those of the author. According to Scholes and Kellogg, “In any written [fictional] narrative . . . there will be at least a potential, and usually an actual, disparity between the knowledge and values of the author and those of the narrator” (53). In Matshoba’s stories there is no such disparity. As Kirkwood notes, Matshoba is at the furthest possible remove from the indifferent, detached author of the modernist novel:

I confess that I find it difficult, as I read Matshoba’s stories, not to see him in front of me. It is the polar opposite of James Joyce paring his fingernails behind the complete and self-sufficient artwork. . . . His narrator is a participant. He carries the function of the storyteller into the midst of the fractured lives of the prisoners of apartheid. He is the

sympathetic listener who tells the stories of others, but sometimes he will advise, and maybe [at] a crucial juncture he will act (as in the title story). He looks for the continuities hidden under the oppressed face of the land.²⁷

The narrator not only speaks for the author; he may in fact *be* the author, reporting on events which he has himself witnessed.²⁸ In “Three Days” the narrator is referred to as “Mtu” (short for “Mtutuzeli”)(146), and in “To Kill a Man’s Pride”²⁹ the narrator introduces himself to a friend as “Mtutu” (106), all of which suggests that author does not distinguish between himself and his narrators. This story’s authority derives in large part from its being an eye-witness account of what seem to be actual events. The precise notation of place (the station bridge at Mzimhlope), of time (about five on a Friday afternoon) and of event (the arrival and departure of particular trains) supports the view that we are (or could be) dealing with an empirical, first-hand report of actual events. Appeals are made to the authority of the probable reader (“a person who has spent some time in Soweto” (19)) and for such a person (with his or her insider’s knowledge) the narrated events would be familiar, everyday occurrences. A distinguishing characteristic of Matshoba’s storytelling, then, is this blurring of the border between fact and fiction. Is this realism (a fictional technique), or is this reality (albeit mediated through an eye-witness report)? Vaughan comments:

The illusion-creating fictional narrative is shallow, and not allowed to develop the semblance of autonomy. It is constantly punctured by a non-fictional narrative voice, a voice of social and historical analysis, of practical advice, of counsel. . . .In formal terms, the space between fiction and actuality is abbreviated.

(“The Stories of Mtutuzeli Matshoba 45)

The *Drum* writers, on the other hand, operated within the conventions of realist fiction. The reader was never in doubt that he or she was reading an invented narrative involving fictional characters – no matter how realistic the setting or life-like the characters. Mashoba’s stories violate many of the conventions associated with the art

²⁷ Quoted by Mzamane in his “Introduction” to *Hungry Flames*. The quotation comes from a letter from Kirkwood to Mzamane on 17 March 1980.

²⁸ Although Sole argues that “the character of the narrator is nuanced and carefully crafted” (“Political Fiction, Representation and the Canon” (109), he also acknowledges that the narrator is “analogous to, and at times indistinguishable from, the author himself” (“Authority, Authenticity and the Black Writer” 225).

²⁹ “To Kill a Man’s Pride” is not included in *Call me Not a Man*. It was first published in *Forced Landing* (1980).

of fiction. Williams and Sole comment on the discomfort of some early reviewers: “Lionel Abrahams, for example, interspersed his positive comments with an anxiety that they disregarded ‘a number of rules for effective fiction’ – in particular those regarding lack of narrative economy and the disruption of the illusion of fictionality” (“Political Fiction, Representation and the Canon” 105).³⁰ Abrahams states that Matshoba is concerned “less with art than with relevance”, uses statement rather than implication, and resorts to “caricature” (quoted by Williams 6).

When one looks at particular stories, it becomes obvious that Matshoba is deliberately violating the conventions associated with realist fiction; rather than judge him by standards which may be irrelevant, it is important to look closely and carefully at what he is actually doing. In “Call me not a Man”, the narrator is also in effect the protagonist – albeit an unusually passive protagonist. We never depart from the frame of his eye-witness narration, and the story reveals and dramatises his reactions to events as they unfold. His vantage point (the station bridge a few metres above the street) provides an elevated view, and his detachment from the action provides him with a security that the commuters below lack: “I was not moving from where I was simply because the reservists were coming down the street like a bunch of villains” (20). His inability to intervene reveals his impotence: “We remained where we had been and watched the persecution from above” (21). He and his friend do finally intervene – but only after the railway policeman has stepped in: “The other people joined in and we jeered the cowards off the station” (21). After witnessing the brutal beating of the *goduka*, they intervene again (although they never leave the safety of the station bridge): “We could not stand the sickening beating that the other man was receiving anymore” (25). As an angry crowd begins to gather, the reservists back off.

Characterisation in the usual sense of the word is entirely absent in this story. The *goduka* is simply a representative figure: he is not named, and we learn nothing about him apart from what the narrator can infer from his familiarity with the type: “It was doubtless a *goduka* on his way home to his family after many months of work in the city” (23).³¹ As Vaughan points out, “the whole liberal preoccupation with individual interiority, and hence with subtle and elaborate characterisation, is dispensed with. . . . Matshoba concentrates on *situation*. Each story has an *exemplary*

³⁰ Sole is quoting from a review, “Fiction with Flexibility”, which appeared in the *Rand Daily Mail* (1 October 1979).

³¹ The exploitation of migrant labour was of course a key feature of the apartheid economy.

quality” (“The Stories of Mtutuzeli Matshoba” 45). The *goduka*’s situation – and the helplessness of the narrator – both illustrate the plight of the black man in apartheid South Africa. According to Vaughan, “[The stories’] subject matter has an evidently model-like character, a typicality” (“Literature and Politics” 131).³² The story reveals the helplessness of the commuters (and in particular the *goduka*) but points to the possibility of resistance through collective action. The narrator’s commentary places the narrated events in a perspective which reveals their political meaning. This perspective is that of Black Consciousness, with its appeal to black self-assertion and solidarity.

These features recur in Matshoba’s stories, but with variations. In the opening story of the collection, “My Friend, the Outcast”, the narrator tells the story of what happened to his friend, Vusi. His imagination enables him to reconstruct scenes at which he was not present:

Roughly, here is the story of my friend. Mind you, I was not there when it all started to happen, but I can just imagine what took place; what with such things being part of life for us darkies. We read about them in the papers, we hear about them every other day, we come across the people who bring them about, who cause our friends pain and sorrow, many times in our lives. But when you read about it or hear about it, it is never as real as when it happens to someone who is close to you.

(“My Friend” 1-2)

This gives some insight into Matshoba’s conception of his role as storyteller. His narrative draws on material that would be familiar to any black person, either from personal experience, or from hearsay (or, sometimes, from news reports). His story will rival or supplement these other sources by providing a fuller, more vivid account, supported by his first-hand observation. The repeated collective pronoun (“we”) stresses the communal nature of this experience, and implies the possibility of a

³² Sole argues that Matshoba is concerned (at least to some extent) with “the individual consciousness of his characters and readers” and that they do “focus powerfully on the lives of individuals” (“Authority, Authenticity and the Black Writer”). This seems doubtful. The *goduka* is not a “character” in the usual sense of the word and there is no attempt to depict any individual, differentiating characteristics: he is simply a particular instance of a type, and displays the generic features of the *goduka* (lack of sophistication, naivete, simplicity, etc.). Significantly, he even lacks a personal name. Sole does go on to say that “the connection between the individual and the social is often achieved . . . through various strategies of typification” (212).

shared response. The direct address to the audience and the informal style suggest that certain features of oral narrative have been carried over into his written account.

In this story the narrator's role is that of the friend who offers support in Vusi's hour of need (his family are about to be evicted from their township house). When the narrator encounters Vusi, he insists on knowing what is wrong – "That is what friendship was made for" (9). When he hears Vusi's story, the narrator's empathy – and impotence – are again revealed: "I hated myself for being so impotent in the face of a friend's distress" (10). Somewhat improbably, perhaps, he relies on the hope that the WRAB officials "were also human and would not be so callous as to throw them out on the dusty streets" (10). (Would Matshoba share this optimism, one wonders?) The effect is to throw the actual heartlessness of the officials – "Beak nose" and "Lion face" (11) – into sharp relief. Vusi's mother shows remarkable forbearance in her refusal to hate those who have conspired to evict her. Here the story takes on something of the aspect of a morality tale with its near-allegorical representation of character (the saintly mother, the suffering Vusi and the empathetic friend are contrasted with the almost diabolical officials). In their deliberate exploitation of the weak and the defenceless, "Beak Nose" and "Lion Face" become the embodiments of a heartless, evil system.³³

The *deus ex machina* comes in the form of the man whose offer of a bribe had triggered the eviction of Vusi's family: when he realises what he has (unwittingly) been responsible for, "his heart bleed[s]" (14). He has been tricked into "causing anguish to this poor family" (15). He is hailed as a "brother", gives helpful advice, renounces his claim to the house, and is thanked for his "noble deed" (15). Here we have an exemplary instance of a black man refusing to exploit a corrupt system for personal gain – a victory for compassion over greed and self-interest. The resolution of the family's crisis depends on the good-heartedness of one individual – and on the intervention of a liberal English-language newspaper, the *Star*. There is little evidence here of the militancy and pride associated with the slogan, "Black man, you're on your own".

As a result of their focus on a single, related sequence of events, these two stories are more unified than the other, longer narratives and do at least – in terms of structure and event – bear some resemblance to the conventional short story. In "My

³³ At one point one has a "smirk of sadistic satisfaction" on his face (12).

Friend, the Outcast” the narrator resorts to imaginatively (re)constructing particular scenes, giving the narrative something of the quality of realist fiction. An example is the scene where Vusi’s mother pleads her case before the superintendent (5-6). Explanatory or interpretative comment (when present) is often reflected through the consciousness of Vusi (““A guy’s mere existence is a crime in this cursed world”” (2)). Vusi’s family members are individualised to some extent. The description of the sleeping family includes a reference to Vusi’s brother, Muntu, sleeping off the effects of too much *skokiaan*, and “snoring like a lawnmower” (2). Vusi has to restrain the unbrotherly urge to “kick him in the ribs” (2). While the two superintendents are (deliberately) dehumanised and conform to stereotypical expectations, at one point we gain access to the consciousness of “Beak Nose” as represented through his interior monologue (8). This passage reveals him to be a racist who takes white superiority entirely for granted, but does at least enhance our understanding of the mindset of an apartheid functionary. In general the narrator’s intrusive commentary is kept to a minimum, and the narrative takes on some of the qualities of a fictional story.

“Three Days in the Land of a Dying Illusion” is at the opposite end of Matshoba’s storytelling spectrum. Like “A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana”, this extended narrative allows Matshoba to give full rein to his penchant for interpolation, explanation and exposition. There are a number of discursive passages on topics such as migrant workers, the dissemination of information, the lot of the working class, the superiority of urban life, and the illusion of homeland independence, as well as a number of historical digressions, all loosely held together by the central narrative thread of the narrator’s journey from Johannesburg to the Transkei. The narrator is indistinguishable from Matshoba the author, and at one point is actually referred to (by his friend) as “Mtu” (an abbreviation of the author’s first name, Mtutuzeli) (146). One would be justified in referring to the narrator as “Mtu” or “Matshoba”, and one might read the narrative as a *mélange* of travelogue, polemical essay and autobiographical fragment.³⁴ There is little attempt to create or sustain the illusion of fictionality, and the narrator intrudes at every opportunity. His contributions can hardly be viewed as “digressions” – they are in fact central to Matshoba’s purpose,

³⁴ The autobiographical basis of much of Mathoba’s work is confirmed in his other extended narrative, “A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana”. The purpose of the narrator’s journey in this case is to visit his brother, who is imprisoned on Robben Island. Matshoba informs his that he had a younger brother who was imprisoned on the island, and confirms (in an interview) that “the story is autobiographical” (“Interview” 127).

which is to use his journey to his putative homeland as an opportunity to unmask the lie of “homeland independence”, using whatever discursive methods seem appropriate.

In this narrative, then (to recapitulate some of the points from Vaughan’s analysis) the narrator is a “traveller”; the passing landscape enables the traveller/mapmaker to bring “the repressed dimension of history” to the surface (“The Stories of Mtutuzeli Matshoba” 46) and to connect the present with the struggles of the past (thereby fulfilling one of the central mandates of Black Consciousness).

Every hillock, etched against a clear but moonless sky in which millions of stars formed part of the milky way, was to me like an historical cairn, which had stood there to mark the beginning of time, witnessing every form of life that ever passed over, below and around it; every event

(“Three Days” 147)

There are impressionistic italicised passages which reconstruct episodes from the history of the previous century, in particular the events set in motion by the *mfecane* (“Three Days” (148-150)).³⁵ Even more remarkably, we have the narrator’s retelling of the story of Nongquase (164-179). By providing an opportunity for reflection, travel becomes (as Vaughan suggests) “a motif of redemption” (“The Stories of Mtutuzeli Matshoba” 46).

The traveller deliberately chooses to travel third class, the “people’s class” (144), and so identifies himself with those of “the third denomination” who live in “dog kennel cities” (146). This attempt to identify himself as one of the black oppressed (in spite of his evidently superior education and (arguably) *petit bourgeois* status) is consistent with the Black Consciousness-inspired attempt to affirm a common black identity that transcends class (and other) divisions. “Mtu’s” political commitment is confirmed by his choice of reading matter (Madingoane’s *Africa my Beginning*)³⁶, and by his joining his “brothers” and “sisters” in song: he will “sleep courage” on the train that night (147).

“Mtu’s” fellow passengers are migrant workers returning to their rural “homeland” after their stint on the mines or factories, and “Mtu” comments at length

³⁵ This is a term used by historians to refer to the period of disruption and migration in the early nineteenth century supposedly resulting from the series of events set in motion by the expansion of the Zulu kingdom under Shaka.

³⁶ Published by Ravan Press in 1979 and immediately banned.

on the exploitative migrant labour system (144). Their journey (in contrast to the narrator's) is dictated by the need to sustain their families in the "homeland". In an interview Matshoba speaks of what he calls "this obsession with the train" and discusses the place of the train journey in "the migrant labour culture" ("Interview" 128).³⁷ Here the journey serves to expose the economic realities of dependence and exploitation which "grand apartheid" was designed to conceal. Matshoba reverses the usual pattern of the "Jim comes to Jo'burg story": here "Mtu" is making the return journey to the homeland, accompanied by a trainload of migrant workers. The fact that the returning workers are listening to "the inevitable and regrettable radios" provides the narrator with the opportunity to reflect on the way in which "the minds of [his] people are stolen" ("Three Days" 144):

Let me explain how this mental outrage comes about: the system denies the black man enlightenment by subjecting him to an inferior and expensive education. In other words the rural black masses have little or no education. Neither can they read or write, and if they can they are conditioned to empty materialistic values. . . . To them, the radio is still one of the technological wonders of the world And there is no suspicion in their minds that the box may tell lies in their languages. The rest you can figure out for yourselves.
(“Three Days” 144)

This leaves little for the reader to do; "Mtu" has told us everything we need to know. Matshoba's purpose is palpable: his aim is to educate his readers and to counteract the effect of three centuries of colonisation and decades of apartheid-era propaganda. The historical narratives that are embedded in the story are part of a project to "decolonise the mind" and return an awareness of their history to his readers. At one point "Mtu" actually apologises for the frequent "interpositions", but it is difficult to take this "apology" seriously. Matshoba's moral and political earnestness permeates the narrative; at times, in fact, his style bears an unexpected resemblance to that of R.R.R. Dhlomo in *An African Tragedy*. Their respective ideologies may be poles apart, but there is the same didactic intent, and the same resort to what are in effect homilies aimed at the reader. As a result Matshoba's language is, in Bakhtinian terms, "ideologically saturated" (Bakhtin 271). He has clearly taken to heart Biko's maxim

³⁷ A train was, in effect, "a mobile meeting place"; according to Matshoba, "That is virtually where COSATU was built" (Interview" 129).

that “the most important weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed” (*I Write What I Like* 92).

Early in “Three Days” a dramatised scene provides a welcome counterpoint to the “unitary language” of the narrator.³⁸ When “Mtu” boards a bus at Queenstown he finds himself in the midst of a lively discussion among the returning migrant workers. The discussion reveals the stresses which the migrant labour system imposes on ordinary family relationships. One speaker resorts to proverbial wisdom as he explains the role played by the wife: “‘*Umfazi yintsika yekhaya.*’ (The woman is the pillar of the home)” (153). He reproaches the men for drinking “*utshwala*” (beer) and sleeping with concubines while their wives suffer at home. Another speaker, a young man, argues that they have to work like slaves (“*singamakhoboka nje*”) to support their absent wives, who may themselves be guilty of consorting with “*amahlalela*” (loafers) (153). A woman passenger finally breaks into what is supposedly “a men’s discussion” and accuses men of lacking consideration and being “all the same” (154). She suggests that it is their cowardice which is responsible for the conditions they complain about: “‘Where were the men when the land and cattle were lost?’” (156). She stoutly defends her right to enter the discussion (“‘I am a woman *wesimanje-manje* (of this time)’”) (155) and succeeds in turning the tables on her opponent. The narrator – who can’t resist restating her argument in his own words – seems to applaud her spirit: “Indomitable Xhosa woman!” (156). The narrator may seem to display a welcome sensitivity to gender issues, but even here his restatement of her position implies that he can communicate her meaning better than she can herself: “What she actually wanted to ask was, in simple terms” (156). The narrator’s position fluctuates in the course of the discussion, but at least in this scene the author allows a lively debate to take place.

Later, when they reach the “rural homeland”, “Mtu” apostrophizes rural Transkeian woman in stereotypical terms: they are “examples of African femininity untainted by western standards” (161); there is “nothing more beautiful than a woman, an African woman” (161). She comes to stand for timeless, unchanging African values (“Africa will survive in spite of her scarred visage” (161)) and she confirms the “virility” of “a son of the continent” (161). The woman here is simply the object of a

³⁸ A “unitary language” works towards establishing a particular orthodoxy. The dramatized scene in the bus gives expression to the variety of voices (and perspectives) present in any language. The debate that takes place is potentially liberating and subverts the monologic language of the narrator (Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel” 270-272).

male gaze, and is made to serve what is essentially a conservative, Africanist and patriarchal ideology. She is as fixed and timeless as the traditional Africa she is supposed to embody. The narrator concedes that he has been overcome by “an inexplicable nostalgia for the unknown past” (161).

At other points the narrator reveals a preference for urban life (“my heart will never be parted from my polluted, rat-race city background” (151) and finds the country “too dull and mentally unhealthy” (151). This contrasts with his professed interest in and identification with those of the “third denomination” (146, 152). At times he cannot help sounding superior or condescending: “Poor brothers, fighting among themselves, little aware that the congestion had occurred because we of the third denomination were fenced into a quarter of the platform area . . .” (152). In these ways, in spite of the appeal to a homogenous black identity, the narrative in fact exposes tensions and differences based on gender, class, education and occupation.

When the narrator reaches Umtata, the somewhat anticlimactic conclusion reveals the extent to which he and his friends no longer share a common political outlook: his friends are now “citizens of a bantustan” (180), and part of a “rural petit bourgeoisie” (187); they drive a Mercedes Benz, avoid mixing socially with those of the “third denomination” (186), and seem “content to cling to the little they had and remain silent” (187). A yawning gulf seems to separate Soweto, where “the sense of bitterness in the black man’s soul” (186) is unmistakable, from Umtata. The narrator leaves, vowing never to set foot in the Transkei again.

A generalised discussion of Mashoba’s fiction in terms of “themes” or “motifs” tends to elide the differences in narrative strategy and style between particular stories. However insightful, the discussions by Vaughan (and subsequently, Sole) result in a somewhat homogenised reading which focuses on the ideological implications of the fiction. Both Vaughan and Sole point to the tension in Matshoba’s work between race-based and class-based explanations; both stress Matshoba’s own petit-bourgeois position, and the comparative neglect of working conditions and trade union activity in his stories.³⁹ What tends to be neglected are questions regarding the status of his stories as fiction, his use of particular storytelling techniques and conventions, and the effect on the reader of his mixed-mode narratives. Does

³⁹ “There is no emphasis upon the positive potentiality of specifically working class forms of consciousness, or working class forms of solidarity” (Vaughan, “The Stories of Mtutuzeli Matshoba” 47).

Matshoba in fact produce a fiction which is “closely in touch with popular experience” (Vaughan, “The Stories of Mtutuzeli Matshoba” 45)? At times the narrator’s comments and reactions reveal gender, class or educational differences that undermine the assertion of a common black identity.⁴⁰ The voice of explanation and exposition which is such a prominent feature of the stories may at times alienate the reader, especially where the explanation seems gratuitous. The stories may well be, as Vaughan suggests, “a medium of counsel about some of the exemplary situations of township life” (“The Stories of Mtutuzeli Matshoba” 46) – but since the implied audience of township insiders would be thoroughly familiar with these situations, there is some risk of redundancy. Ironically it is the (presumably unintended) white middle-class reader who may benefit most from the authorial commentary.

It has been suggested that in these stories Matshoba is indebted to traditional oral storytelling techniques. Mackenzie suggests that Matshoba “adopts a tone and style strongly reminiscent of the oral storyteller” (“The Use of Orality” 347), and in her study of Matshoba’s stories Williams argues that many of the “anomalies” that critics identify in his work (plotlessness, the inclusion of long polemical speeches, flat characterisation, the lack of narrative pace) can be traced to Matshoba’s “bias towards traditional oral forms”.⁴¹ Oral storytellers do not, however, usually employ first-person narrators, and while they may often digress, they are careful to sustain narrative interest. The first law of oral storytelling is to capture and hold the attention of the audience, and Matshoba’s lengthier narratives make quite severe demands on the readers’ attention.⁴² It is in any case impossible to translate oral performance to the written page.⁴³ Traces of oral narrative style may survive, but these will be vestiges or remnants at best. These traces can be seen in the informal style and tone adopted by Matshoba’s narrator, and in his direct address to his audience. Occasionally the narrator/Matshoba does show an awareness of the need to sustain the readers’ interest: “How right I was with my latter interpretation, as I would soon

⁴⁰ Vaughan himself reaches much the same conclusion: “Emphasis upon the personalized relation of the counsel-giving friend seems to go with a representation of popular consciousness as politically passive and fragmented” (“The Stories of Mtutuzeli Matshoba” 47).

⁴¹ Cited by Mackenzie, 348.

⁴² As one instance (among many) one may refer to the summary of South African history offered in the final pages of “Three Days in the Land of Dying Illusion” (183-185).

⁴³ In his discussion of the “paralinguistic resources” available to the oral storyteller, Okpewho comments: “To make the narration more vivid and compelling the performer must accompany the words of the tale with the appropriate face and body movements to illustrate such things as fear, anxiety, delight, and the behaviours of the various characters in the tale” (45).

discover! However, let me not douse your interest. We shall go on in the bus to Umtata before I give my exposition” (“Three Days” 157). This kind of announcement, with its self-conscious deliberation, would be unusual in oral narrative, which relies on establishing an immediate rapport between performer and audience. Matshoba’s narratives also bear little resemblance to the kind of stories that used to captivate Ndebele: “I have listened to countless storytellers on the buses and trains carrying people to and from work in South Africa. The majority of them have woven masterpieces of instruction and entertainment. Others were so popular that commuters made sure they did not miss the storytellers’ trains” (“Turkish Tales” 32). In these popular narratives “instruction” goes hand-in-hand with “entertainment”. In Matshoba’s case, storytelling has taken on the function of social and political exposition and commentary, and it sometimes labours under the burden:

In societies such as South Africa, where social, economic, and political oppression is stark, such conditions tend to enforce, almost with the power of natural law, overt tendentiousness in the artist’s choice of subject matter, and in the handling of that subject matter. It is such tendentiousness which, because it can most easily be interpreted as ‘taking a position’, earns a work of art the title of ‘commitment’ or ‘engagement’.

(Ndebele, “Turkish Tales” 22)

Ndebele’s critique, developed in a number of essays, engages with the assumptions of this mode of “spectacular” storytelling. According to Ndebele, these stories are “built around the interaction of surface symbols of South African reality”, which appear as “finished products, often without a personal history” (23). The result is “not knowledge but indictment” (“Turkish Tales” 23). He suggests that this results “a conflict between the aim of storytelling and that of imparting social information” (“Turkish Tales” 24), and goes on to cite the Matshoba’s stories as an example:

I have also found Mtutuzeli Matshoba’s depiction of social reality in this stories simply too overwhelming. His basic technique has been to accumulate fact after fact of oppression and suffering, so that we are in the end almost totally grounded in this reality without being offered, at the same time, an opportunity for aesthetic and critical estrangement.

(“Turkish Tales” 27)

Ndebele makes an important point: at times one does feel “overwhelmed” by the documentation of suffering, by the weight of explanation, and by the lack of “aesthetic and critical estrangement”. If one locates Matshoba in the context of his time, however, one can understand why the impulse to indict, to inform, and to persuade should be so dominant. His fiction is a response to the same pressures that produced the performance-oriented poetry and theatre of the 1970s. It may be helpful to recall Kavanagh’s description of this form of theatre:

[It] combined elements of realism and non-realism. All these groups freely and at times arbitrarily discarded the illusion of reality and any artificial barriers between the action and the audience. Meaning was communicated in polemical speeches or in strong, harsh images Such a form emerged organically from the relation of the audience to the performers. [The actors] were angry members of a wronged community talking directly to other members of that community about their common oppression.

(166)

Transfer this to the medium of prose fiction and you get something like Matshoba’s form of storytelling. This does not necessarily produce a literature of “surface meanings”: at times Matshoba does allow for a deeper exploration of the relevant issues – as in the scene in the bus in “Three Days”.⁴⁴ Something more than just a simplified or “superficial” picture of the *goduka* does emerge from “Call me not a Man”. We cannot help but be involved in the plight of this unfortunate person, who is brought to life and “captured” through the use of closely observed detail:

There was a man coming down Mohale Street On his right shoulder was a large suitcase with a gray blanket strapped to it with flaxen strings. From his left hand hung a bulging cardboard box, only a few inches from the ground, and tilting him to that side. He walked with the bounce of someone used to walking in gumboots and on uneven ground. There was the urgency of someone who had a long way to travel in this gait. It was doubtless a *goduka* on his way to his family after many months of work in the city.

(23)

This cannot be dismissed as simply “imparting social information” – unless one recognises that such “information” is being imparted in an unusually vivid and

⁴⁴ Something similar happens in Ndebele’s story “The Prophetess”, where commuters on a township bus enter into a lively debate about the alleged powers of the prophetess (33-36).

immediate way. There is the imaginative insight here that one associates with prose fiction. We may not know this person's name or particular personal history, but he emerges as more than just a type. The scene where he prostrates himself before his tormentors conveys in concrete, visual terms the debasement of human dignity that characterised life under apartheid. In responding to Matshoba's stories now, one needs to acknowledge their capacity to unsettle familiar assumptions about the short story, as well as their continuing significance as testimonies to black experience during a formative period of our recent history.⁴⁵

MIRIAM TLALI

Miriam Tlali's significance for this study is self-evident: she is the first black woman, writing from within South Africa, to make a sustained contribution to black South African literature. Her struggle to find a voice as a writer is paradigmatic of the difficulties which any black woman in South Africa would have encountered during the apartheid years; her ability to surmount these obstacles is testimony to her courage and determination – and to her seriousness as writer. Richard Rive describes the reception of her first novel, *Muriel at Metropolitan* (1975), as follows:

Almost a decade ago, in 1975, a slim book made its appearance in South Africa. It raised little comment, received slight acclaim and its life was a short one before it was banned. . . . *Muriel at Metropolitan* was an autobiographical novel based on the experiences of Miriam Tlali while she was working as a clerk-typist in a Johannesburg shop, selling electrical wares. . . . In her book she depicted no major calamity and the tone was subdued by comparison with the anger of earlier Protest Writers. The force of her work was its honest attention to detail and its complete lack of histrionic gestures.

(“Introduction” ix)

In accounting for the relative lack of recognition for Tlali's work inside South Africa, one must take into account institutional and societal factors, in particular, the tendency in a society that is both racist and patriarchal to downplay or devalue the contribution of black women writers. (One might contrast Tlali's reception with the

⁴⁵ Vaughan suggests that we can attribute Matshoba's break with fictional conventions to the fact that, as products of Bantu Education, the writers of his generation were “simply unschooled in the aesthetics of liberalism” (“Literature and Politics” 133). I tend to agree with Kunene, who believes that Matshoba “quite intentionally engages in this movement back and forth between the fictional and the mini-essay mode . . .” (*Writers from South Africa* 19). Bunn argues similarly that Matshoba “is very conscious of his own role as a historian, of stepping outside the novelist's position” (*Writers from South Africa* 35).

recognition accorded to black male writers like Matshoba, Mzamane, Serote and Ndebele.) Some of the more obvious difficulties which Tlali encountered have already been mentioned: lack of access to books or libraries, the struggle to acquire a tertiary education and her mother's ambition for her to become a doctor; to this one should add the struggle to support her family and fulfil the familial and societal expectations of her as mother and housewife.

In a number of interviews and articles, Tlali gives a compelling account of the obstacles that she has had to overcome. Most obviously, perhaps, she had to contend with traditional expectations of black women: "To quote her grandmother, 'to say woman is to say pot; to say woman is to say broom'" (Rive, "Introduction" x)⁴⁶. Tlali had to fight for the right to read: "My grandmother used to be shocked to find me picking up a book first thing in the morning instead of sleeping or cooking for my husband. You are essentially a worker, a person who uses her hands" ("Interview" 83).⁴⁷ Her daughter would refer to her mother's habit of reading books as "Mama's disease" – suggesting just how aberrant this behaviour seemed to those around her ("A Writer's Read: Miriam Tlali" 10). A turning-point in her life seems to have been the discovery of the tin trunk full of her father's books which her mother kept locked until she was in high school ("An angry writer mellows" 28).⁴⁸ She had to struggle to find the funds for her university education (first at Wits University, and then at the University College in Lesotho). Eventually she took courses in bookkeeping and typing and found a job in a Johannesburg furniture shop, Mayfair Radio and Appliances – an experience which provided the basis for her first novel, *Muriel at Metropolitan* (1975) She had to struggle to reconcile the conflicting roles of wife, mother, housewife and writer: "From the outset it was evident that even if I had a study (which I have never had) I would never find solace in it" ("Quagmires and Quicksands" 95). By the time she was studying at Wits University, Tlali was the mother of two children – "a true African housewife, complete with a husband and a home to look after" ("A Writer's Read: Miriam Tlali" 10). To avoid subjecting her

⁴⁶ This quotation is reproduced on the cover of *Mihloti*. Tlali also quotes the traditional Sesotho saying, "Mma ngoana o tshwara thipa ka fa bogaleng" (the child's mother holds the sharpest end of the knife) ("Black women criticized for not continuing struggle" (7). Clearly, motherhood is not an unadulterated pleasure.

⁴⁷ On the other hand, her interest in storytelling began when she sat on her grandmother's knee and listened to her traditional stories, "passed down through the family for generations" ("Urge to write goads Miriam" 12). The comparison with Gcina Mhlope is instructive.

⁴⁸ Her mother then "dished [the books] out slowly to her daughter, one by one" ("An angry writer mellows" 28).

young children to Bantu Education, she sent them away to stay with her mother, who had moved to Lesotho: “I’ll never forgive this government for the fact that I’ve had to live a life without my children” (“An angry writer mellows” 28). Books, typewriters and writing materials were “luxury items” (“Remove the Chains” 26). She was denied access to the books she wanted to read: when she sat down to write *Muriel at Metropolitan* (in 1968),⁴⁹ public libraries were closed to her, township libraries were non-existent or inadequate, and censorship and bannings meant that most books by black writers were unavailable:

They say that writers learn from their predecessors. When the writing instinct was sufficiently kindled in me, I tried to look around for inspiration, for any works by black authors. There was nothing but a void. . . . I wanted to read such authors as Ezekiel Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi, Alex la Guma, Peter Abrahams, Dennis Brutus, I.B. Tabata, Albert Luthuli, Nelson Mandela and Mangaliso Sobukwe. My frantic search yielded no positive results.

(“Remove the Chains” 23)⁵⁰

Having completed her first manuscript and (eventually) secured a publisher (Ravan Press) Tlali discovered that as she was legally a minor, her husband was required by law to sign the contract on her behalf.⁵¹ When *Muriel at Metropolitan* was finally published (six years after completion) it was “very much expurgated” – apparently to make it “acceptable to the white reader” (Lockett, “Interview” 71). In a later interview, she explains that the publisher cut out “all these parts where I was preaching – including the entire first chapter” (Jolly, “Interview” 144). When Longmans brought out an edition in 1979 which restored these cuts (but contained other errors), this edition was immediately banned, along with the previous edition (“Profile: Miriam Tlali” 30, 31).⁵² When *Amandla* was published in 1980 it was

⁴⁹ The opportunity to write the book arose when she had to stay at home to nurse her terminally-ill mother-in-law (quoted by Laurretta Ngcobo, “Miriam Tlali” 382).

⁵⁰ It is instructive to compare her situation with that of a white woman writer like Nadine Gordimer, or with that of black male writers (like Mzamane or Ndebele) who received their secondary education in Swaziland. It is also worth noting that all the writers she cites are men.

⁵¹ He refused (since his wife “was in full control of her mental faculties and could read and write”) and so Ravan decided to allow Tlali to sign the contract and “face the consequences” (“Remove the Chains” 26).

⁵² An article in *The Argus* of 25 September 1979 gives a fuller account of Board’s objections. The Director of Publications listed eight instances where “Afrikaners or whites” were presented in a “contemptuous” manner. There were also “a large number of descriptions calculated to injure the relationship between white and black” (18). These included contrasting the wealth and comfort of

banned within six weeks of publication.⁵³ Tlali describes the effect of banning as follows: “Very very depressing indeed. It’s like erecting a big iron wall between yourself and your own people, the people you’re trying to reach. It’s like spitting into a dead wall” (“Interview” 77). Partly as a result of censorship, she was more widely read overseas during the 1980s than in her own country.

Tlali also had to endure police harassment and intimidation, described in some detail in “Quagmires and Quicksands” (96-97).⁵⁴ After a visit by the Special Branch she felt so disturbed that she wondered “just how [she] would summon the courage to write” (“Quagmires and Quicksands” 97). In the 1980s she resorted to wrapping books in aluminium foil and burying them in the yard of her Soweto house.⁵⁵ Time spent out of the country, in Holland or the United States, seems to have been crucial for Tlali’s development as a writer. Most of the stories in *Footprints in the Quag* (published overseas by Pandora as *Soweto Stories*) were written during a year spent in Holland, and the book is dedicated to “the courageous Dutch women” who made it possible for her write. In spite of the many and varied demands on her time in South Africa, Tlali was able to make her presence felt in a number of ways. She was one of the founders of (and a regular contributor to) *Staffrider*; she also helped to found the African Writers Association (AWA) and was a board member of Skotaville, an independent black publisher. Invariably, she was the only woman represented on these boards and editorial committees.

Tlali would have also had to deal with more subtle societal and ideological pressures: in the heightened political climate of the late-1970s and 1980s she would have been expected to demonstrate her solidarity (with men) in the struggle against racial oppression. At the same time, she would have been expected to demonstrate her respect for traditional (African) cultural values and practices.⁵⁶

whites with the poverty and oppression of blacks, and an allegation that whites had seized the land from blacks.

⁵³ One of her stories, “Just for Two”, was even banned prior to publication, in 1978. (“An Angry writer mellows”).

⁵⁴ On one occasion, when Helen Suzman intervened on her behalf, she was told by the chief of police in Pretoria that “Miriam Tlali should expect to be treated like that because she is an enemy of the state” (“Quagmires and Quicksands” 97).

⁵⁵ At the time of her interview with Jolly (1994) she had still not dug these up!

⁵⁶ The Black Woman’s Federation, formed in 1975 as one of the Black-Consciousness aligned organizations, envisages the role of women in traditional terms: it recognizes that “Black women are basically responsible for the survival and maintenance of their families and the socialization of the youth for the transmission of the Black Cultural Heritage” (quoted by Driver, “Women as Mothers, Women as Writers” 235). Driver goes on to explore “the widespread view that if black men have been “symbolically castrated” by the apartheid regime, then black women, instead of humiliating them

In South Africa, the aspirant African female writer has still to struggle to remove the cobwebs of tradition, custom and the colonial mentality. She has to battle first with herself and then gather enough courage to face the world around her. Many of the women who have come to me for advice feel vulnerable. They labour under a fear of reproach, an invisible yet strong sense of restraint and uncertainty. This inhibits many from even attempting. Often they ask me: ‘Are you not afraid?’ . . . Because they are hampered at every turn, even by the very society they wish to fight for, they find that they have to resort to all kinds of subterfuges to realise their dreams.

(“Remove the Chains” 26)

We may expect to find some of these “subterfuges” present in Tlali’s own writing. In her interview with Lockett she explains her reluctance to accept the designation “feminist” – the term tends to be associated with white, western, middle-class women whose life experience and political position differ greatly from her own. Tlali does, however, assert the strength and (actual or potential) power of African women as *mothers*:

In South Africa, it is the hand of the African woman which rocks the cradle . . . *all cradles*. She is the fulcrum, the staying force, the anchor. . . . The African women are the ‘mothers’, the ‘rulers’. On the final analysis it is on their willing shoulders that the whole system rests. *The pity of it is that they do not know it yet.*

(“Remove the Chains” 26)

In her interview with Lockett, Tlali emphasises the power of black women who “make the home”, who benefit from the guidance of older women, and who as mothers exert “overwhelming power” over their offspring – including, of course, over their male children.⁵⁷ She suggests that men (“even the white ones”) feel

further, should “restore to them their masculinity” (236). Something like this seems to underpin Tlali’s comments on the role of African women, and may help to explain her preference for “womanism”. In fact, however, rather scathing views about African men are often expressed in Tlali’s stories (by, for example, Thabo and Keletso in “Mm’a-Lithoto”).

⁵⁷ This would seem to reflect the “womanist” tendency to affirm supportive roles for women (as mothers and nurturers). It may also be grounded in the realities of the socio-economic and political situation of black women in South African townships during the apartheid years. Lewis quotes a study by Catharine Campbell into the dynamics of township family life: “It is mothers who often take the responsibility for managing the scarce resources available to most working-class families. It is mothers who take care of family members in times of crisis – such as sickness, old age, detention and so on It is mothers that form the emotional nexus of the family” (Lewis 161). Campbell’s study, “The Township Family and Women’s Struggle” was published in *Agenda* in 1990.

disempowered in relation to women: “They compare themselves with the woman, who is so powerful. She gives birth – something they can never do” (“Interview” 75).⁵⁸ This kind of assertion may be somewhat foreign to Anglo-American feminists, for whom motherhood and domesticity are bound up with a patriarchal ideology which they seek to resist; for them, home is more likely to represent a site of oppression.⁵⁹ Tlali has stated that she finds the term “womanist” more acceptable than “feminist”.⁶⁰

Tlali is, however, well aware of the limited role prescribed for women in both the traditional and modern urban contexts, and quotes Sesotho or isiZulu proverbial sayings to illustrate this. She speaks of the constraints (financial and otherwise) that prevent her from writing: “I still have my responsibilities at home, as a housewife” (“Interview” 72). In conversation with other black writers (in 1981), she acknowledges how difficult it is to resist the ideology of domesticity: “The women are subjected to tedious tasks, confined to the kitchen. You’ve got to outgrow that. I had to outgrow the tendency to clean, clean, clean all the time. Those meagre tasks, men are not exposed to them” (Seroki, “Black Writers in South Africa” 43). Here, it would seem, she finds some common ground with Western feminists. She describes her own female role models as angry women: “My own grandmother was a very angry woman, and my mother was My mother had fought the system so much. Her husband – my late father – was very much involved – he was an ANC man” (“Interview” 76). It seems likely, however, that this anger was directed primarily at racial oppression, rather than at patriarchal oppression: the mother is angry at “this

⁵⁸ In “Detour into Detention” Tlali describes how she and the other women she is imprisoned with hold an impromptu service for the martyred Steve Biko in their cell. At one point their “young chair-person” (a co-worker of Biko’s) implores Tlali to lead them in prayer. Tlali feels “uneasy” as she has never done something like this before, but she remembers that “[she] was now a mother and had to summon up courage. The Basotho say: *Mm’a-ngoana o tsoara thipa ka bohaleng* (the child’s mother holds the knife on the sharp edge)” (*Mihloti* 37).

⁵⁹ Hunter in fact suggests that Tlali’s emphasis on woman as mother may be a valuable corrective to the “matrophobia” of much feminist fiction and theorizing (“Women, Tradition and Change” 73). Tlali’s assertion of the strength of women as “mothers” is by no means idiosyncratic: it is echoed, for example, by Ellen Kuzwayo and Gcina Mhlope. The issue is discussed by Driver (“Women as Mothers, Women as Writers”) Hunter and Lewis.

⁶⁰ The term “womanist” has been adopted by Alice Walker and some African woman writers. Walker defines a womanist as: “A black feminist or feminist of colour. . . . A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non sexually Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health” (quoted by Lockett, “Feminism and Writing in English in South Africa” 16). Lewis points out that womanism “tends to naturalise stereotypical definitions of masculinity and femininity, and urges women in their conventional supportive roles to assist in male-centred struggles against white oppression” (162).

quagmire of existence in the townships, where you are forever at loggerheads with the system” (“Interview” 76).

When it comes to the political role of women, Tlali would have been aware of the conventional ANC position, which made the struggle for national liberation a priority. Frene Ginwala, writing in *Work in Progress* in 1986, states what was then the orthodox position:

In South Africa, the prime issue is apartheid and national liberation. . . . Women’s liberation in South African cannot be achieved outside of the context of the liberation struggle. And the question of women’s liberation will only be taken up to the extent that the women are involved in national liberation.

(Ginwala, quoted by Lockett, “Miriam Tlali” 284)⁶¹

This is also consistent with the desire (promoted by adherents of Black Consciousness) for a homogenous black community that will resist racial oppression – women need to stand together with and show solidarity with men in the liberation struggle. In her interview with Lockett, Tlali suggests that the two struggles are necessarily linked: “In South Africa . . . we cannot isolate the problems of women from the general struggle. The two have got to go together, simultaneously. You cannot speak of the one without speaking about the other” (“Interview” 75). She ends the interview with an affirmation that “our liberation is bound absolutely with the liberation of the whole nation” (85). In a subsequent interview with Jolly (in 1994), she explains how she had censored herself when writing *Muriel and Metropolitan* by excluding scenes which revealed the way in which husbands would control their wives’ purchases: “I did not want to overemphasize the problem between the men, African men and African women, because the success of the struggle depended on how united we were against it” (Jolly, “Interview” 146). In the earlier interview she also expresses the view (in response to a question about Gcina Mhlope’s poem, “Say No”) that “there is always tension” and that women should not accept [what Lockett calls] a “back seat”: “I think they should be assertive, and play their role and move out

⁶¹ This should not detract from the fact that the anti-pass law campaign waged by black women under the umbrella of FEDSAW during the 1950s was if anything more determined and committed than that waged by black men. Black women, were, of course, resisting the *extension* of the pass laws to them. Walker argues that FEDSAW represented a “challenge to prejudices against women’s political autonomy and adulthood, prejudices that were deeply rooted within the ANC and the Congress Alliance” (quoted by Lewis 167).

of the cloister in which they have been put. I think it is high time they do this, they have to come forward” (76). All of this points to some ambivalence on her part regarding the (gendered) role of women in the struggle.

Some feminist critics find evidence in Tlali’s fiction for “a developing consciousness of women’s issues, even a feminist awareness across Tlali’s three works” (Lockett, “Miriam Tlali” 282). One should be cautious about applying this kind of logic to a body of work which in many ways resists definition in conventional (Western) critical or theoretical terms. As Wicomb points out, “feminist” can itself become a hegemonic term (“Variety of Discourses” 38). Lockett herself suggests the need for white South African feminists to “listen to black women and not to impose [their] supposedly superior theoretical insights onto their lives” (“Feminism(s) and Writing” 15).⁶² In employing feminist theory in South Africa one has to take into account the very different matrix in which this theory originated: African women may well regard it as a culturally specific product of the particular conditions experienced by privileged, middle-class, professional women in the west.⁶³

This section is an attempt to redress what might seem to be a disproportionate emphasis in this study on black male writers, and to accord Tlali’s work the kind of attention which is surely its due. Lockett reminds us that “the patriarchal literary canon has a centripetal force and a social power that pulls discussion towards its centre”, and that as a result women’s writing often gets “left out” (“Feminism(s) and Writing” 7).⁶⁴ She adopts Showalter’s “gynocritical” approach, which she defines as “a political form of criticism: it confronts instances of specific historical and social oppression and challenges their validity. It aims to reinstate the work of a group of writers silenced (or distorted) by the literary power of the dominant group” (“Feminism(s) and Writing” 9). The striking thing about this definition is that, although Lockett is of course referring specifically to black *women* writers, it could also apply (at least to some degree) to the situation of black *male* writers in this country; they also (if to a lesser extent) constituted a silenced or marginalised group of writers; they also struggled to find the time and space in which to write; they were

⁶² Sisi Maqagi’s response to Lockett’s article shows how difficult it is to avoid applying what may seem to be “superior theoretical insights” (“Who Theorises?” 22-25).

⁶³ I recognise, of course, that there is no such thing as a single or unified feminist discourse, and that any male critic who employs feminist insights or reading strategies risks the charge of appropriating these forms of political criticism for his own ends.

⁶⁴ The Women Writing Africa Project is the most sustained attempt to recognize and promote awareness of writing by woman in Africa. Volume 1 is edited by Margaret Daymond et al, and was published in 2003.

also subject the censorship and political harassment, etc.⁶⁵ (One should note, however, that the “silencing” of black writers (whether male or female) is a result of much more than just the “literary” power of the dominant group.)

Tlali’s work is grounded in her experience of what it means to live in South Africa as a black woman. One would expect her work to differ in some important respects from the work of her male counterparts. *Mihloti*, the collection of her writing which precedes *Footprints* (it was published by Skotaville in 1984), is divided into four sections: “New Journalism”, “Interviews”, “Travelogues” and “Short Story”. Her “travelogues” are presented as such, and her narrative of the arrest of ninety-two people who had gathered to attend Biko’s funeral in 1977 is clearly a first-hand account of an actual event in which she was a participant. There is no attempt to compose thinly fictionalised narratives in the style of Matshoba – although both writers seem driven by similar impulses (to narrate, to document, to indict), and at times express similar sentiments. The two interviews included in *Mihloti* reflect Tlali’s long-standing interest in recording the life experience of ordinary black women and men in her community:

People are always coming and telling me their stories. They were aware that I was writing. There are others who even said to me, ‘Oh, my goodness, please tell the world that this is happening to me’, and so on. People like Makalo Magong, who in real life were going through these experiences.

(“Interview” 78).

Her “Soweto Speaking” column appeared in *Staffrider* throughout its first two years of publication, 1978 and 1979. Any study of Tlali’s work would need to acknowledge her interest in recording the experience of township dwellers. Her novels draws directly on personal experience (her own, or that of others); *Amandla* flows directly from the events that she witnessed unfolding around her during that tumultuous year of the Soweto uprising (1976-77).⁶⁶

⁶⁵ I am not of course attempting to equate the difficulties experienced by black male and female writers in South Africa. This section reveals the way in which the odds were stacked against black women writers in this country: putting pen to paper, let alone to securing a publisher, presented enormous difficulties.

⁶⁶ In talking about this, she uses the communal “we”: “We were very much involved in the rioting, in the Amandla riots. We were some of the victims of it. I’ve had many relatives who had to go and look in the mortuaries, in the hospitals and so on. . . . I was reliving and reflecting also the society as a

Tlali's most interesting and innovative work is to be found in her short story collection, *Footprints in the Quag*. This discussion will focus on four of these stories, beginning with the earliest, "The Point of no Return", published initially in *Staffrider* (1978), and republished in *Mihhoti* (1984) and *Footprints* (1989). The *Staffrider* version is introduced by the following description:

Miriam Tlali whose "Soweto Hijack" appeared in the first issue of *Staffrider*, looks back at the sixties in this warm and moving story of S'bongile and Mojalefa, two young people whose lives are swept into the stream of political events.

(*Staffrider* 29)

Without this note, the reader might assume that the story refers to more contemporary events. By locating it in the late 1950s, at the time of heightened resistance to the carrying of passes, Tlali seems to be suggesting that the struggle against apartheid is one long, unfolding process, grounded in history, which will end only when freedom has finally been won. Inevitably, the story is somewhat ahistorical in its projection of attitudes prevalent in the 1970s back onto the youthful protagonist of the story, Mojalefa. His activism and idealism seem more in keeping with the defiant and uncompromising spirit of the 1970s generation of "black power" activists. His discourse is clearly influenced by the Black Consciousness emphasis on "blackness" (as a positive signifier) and by the preoccupation with black manhood in particular (a preoccupation also signalled by the title of Matshoba's collection of stories.)⁶⁷ Mojalefa's political awakening originates in the discovery of his father's impotence and weakness: the house he had proudly constructed for himself should have been "built on *wheels*" (132). As a result, "all that makes a man has been stripped from under his [father's] feet" (136). The story reflects the tendency to idealise and elevate "African womanhood" that we have seen in some of Matshoba's narratives.

Tlali's foregrounding of Mojefa (as protagonist and sub-narrator) suggests her sympathy with his cause; the second half of the story is in effect the story of his coming to awareness as a black South African. As with Matshoba's narratives, Tlali's stories have an educative and conscientising function. This story traces Mojalefa's

whole" ("Interview" 78). The novel was a huge success by South African publishing standards: it sold 5000 copies in the few weeks before it was banned, and a second print run was about to be ordered.

⁶⁷ Mojalefa also describes himself as a "black" and a "son of the soil" and refers to his "duty as a black person" (134).

discovery of his true identity as a “black” and as a son of “the noble house of Monaheng – the true kings of the Basuto nation” (134). His commitment to freeing himself and his people grows to the point that it becomes “an obsession, a dedication” (134).

What view does Tlali (the implied author) take of this “obsession” or “dedication” of Mojalefa’s? The story has two protagonists, and in the first part Bongi’s point of view is accorded equal status and given equal space. She is Mojalefa’s newly-wedded wife, and she has come (with their two-month old child, Gugu) to see him for the last time before he embarks on his protest action. This story is an example of what in the oral tradition would be called a “dilemma” story: we have two apparently irreconcilable perspectives, each of which has its own validity, and there seems to be a balance in their presentation. Authorial commentary is notably absent (in contrast to Matshoba’s reliance on such commentary). The effect here is to explore the dilemma, rather than to pass judgement or persuade the reader to take sides. Bongi’s evident love and concern for Mojalefa and their young child is balanced against his apparently selfless dedication to his cause. We can understand why Bongi should feel that Mojalefa “[cares] more for the course [he has] chosen than for Gugu and [her]” (121). Commitment to a necessarily abstract cause or ideal is weighed against the flesh and blood claims of a loving wife and child. The palpable presence of Bongi and her nursing child places almost unbearable pressure on Mojalefa, who struggles at times to repress his natural human impulses. He tries to explain his apparent abandonment of wife and child: “The future and dignity of the blacks as a nation and as human beings is worth sacrificing for” (123).

Tlali seems to have constructed a story that is genuinely dialogic: the dialogue is sufficiently convincing, the situation is effectively dramatised, and the reader can sympathise with the predicament of both protagonists. Midway through the story the narrative situation changes, however, as Mojalefa in effect takes over, tells his story and supplies the rationale for his actions. The balance shifts in his favour, and Bongi seems to acquiesce at the end:

Bongi stood up slowly. She did not utter a word. There seemed to be nothing to say. She seemed to be drained of all feeling. She felt blank. He thought he detected an air of resignation, a look of calmness in her manner as she moved slowly in the direction of the opening into the street. They stopped and looked at each other. . . . He lifted his chin

slightly with his forefinger and looked into her eyes. They seemed to
smile. They parted. (137)

Natrass argues that this ending is in fact equivocal, and points to the use of “seemed” (used no fewer three times) (43). The uncertainty arises partly from the fact the Mojalefa becomes the focaliser: we see Bongi through his eyes and the conclusions reached are necessarily speculative: *Is* there really nothing to say? *Do* her eyes in fact smile at him? *Has* she in fact acquiesced – and if so, for how long? Arguably, this narrative uncertainty points to the presence of doubts that Tlali may herself have been unable to suppress: as a woman, a wife, and a mother, she might be expected empathise with Bongi’s situation. In the hands of a male writer (like Matshoba) the ending would no doubt have been much less equivocal.

How might a reader sensitive to the politics of gender react to this narrative? Mojalefa’s tendency to stereotype “African women” by idealising them or placing them on a pedestal is of course as much part of sexist discourse as is the opposite tendency to denigrate woman. For Mojalefa, it would be “desecration” if a woman were to be stopped and asked to produce a pass (122). As his story unfolds, it becomes evident that the discourse of political struggle is a deeply gendered discourse: it will be up to the women – “the ones who remain behind” – to motivate the men (123): their role is essentially supportive or ancillary. Bongi’s role as mother, nurturer and custodian of their child is enacted when she suckles her child and when she (apparently) agrees to “remain behind” and accept her responsibility as child-bearer and child-carer: Gugu is their “valuable keepsake” – and the link which binds Bongi and Mojalefa together (127).⁶⁸ Driver is clearly correct when she observes that in this story “the gender roles assigned within the context of an oppressed and revolutionary society are not interrogated; the narrator unblinkingly reproduces the man as activist and the woman as patient wife” (“Review” 52). Mojalefa’s conduct follows a stereotypical pattern: he has persuaded the woman (the weaker sex?) to submit to his sexual needs, and he refers (by way of compensation) to Bongi as possessing “those rare, delicate attributes that any man would want to feel around him and be enkindled by” (128). At this point we are, momentarily, back in the world of the popular romance with its promotion of the cult of femininity (compare the stilted dialogue and sentiments of the young lovers in Can Themba’s “Mob Passion”).

⁶⁸ Symbolically, the child also comes to represent the future for which Mojalefe is fighting: he doesn’t want his son to grow up a virtual “slave” in an oppressive society.

Bongi, for her part, enacts the role of the passive victim who simply submits to the man's demands: "Why did you do this to me?", she asks (126). (Did she feel no desire herself, one wonders?) She is essentially passive: "You made me fall for you" (126). Mojalefa reproaches himself for his "weakness" and for failing to "show a true respect for our African womanhood" and to live up to his "disciplinary code" (128). Bongi is politically naïve, and has to be admonished by her husband: "You amuse me, Bongi. So you think because we are more educated we have reason to be proud? Of what should we feel proud in a society where the mere pigmentation of your skin condemns you to nothingness?" (129-130). Bongi can only bite her lips and reply (with tears in her eyes), "I do not know, Mojalefa" (130). The story could in fact have been subtitled "The Education of Bongi". Some readers might (with some justification) view Mojalefa as an unpleasantly deluded character who makes Bongi serve both his sexual and his ideological needs. At no point does he acknowledge the selfhood or individuality of the person he supposedly loves, and in the end he succeeds in silencing her. He holds the trump card: he is in possession of the master discourse (the discourse of political struggle) – but this is clearly permeated with sexist and patriarchal assumptions which demean and diminish women (even as it seems to elevate them).

This interpretation problematises any attempt to read the story at face value, or on terms that would endorse Mojalefa's dedication to the cause of national liberation. This alternative reading points to the need to be alert to possible signs of resistance in the text to the dominant discourse. One such sign of resistance might be the equivocal final paragraph: "Tlali, perhaps unconsciously, hints at her own lingering resistance to this unequal concept of gender relations" (Natrass 43).

"Mm'a-Lithoto" is in many respects the centrepiece of *Footprints*, and shows a development towards greater complexity and a more deliberate foregrounding of gender issues. Like "Point of no Return", this story explores a central dilemma, but it ends without arriving at any resolution. In fact – given her situation and circumstances – Paballo's dilemma seems incapable of resolution. The reader's ever-deepening understanding of her situation accrues as a result of the dramatised presentation of the choices which face her at this crossroads in her life. When we encounter her she is sitting with her "bundles" (of possessions), her teenage niece Mahali (whose name means "Bride-price") and her three-year-old son Mzwandile at a railway station. She

has left her house earlier that day following a row with her husband, and her dilemma is made more acute by the fact that she is pregnant. Each option is considered and eliminated as impossible: they can't "ask for sleep" from Paballo's aunt, Mm'a Letia, who already has more on her hands (in terms of family dependents) than she can cope with; nor can Paballo simply leave her husband and get her own house (township regulations prevent this); nor can she act on Mahali's next "brainwave" and stay with Uncle Tsitso in Kwa-Thema (this is impractical, for various reasons). Finally she resorts to appealing to her brother, Mpempe, who stays in Malopo township. All he can do, however, is return them to Paballo's husband's house, and leave them with the very in-laws who were part of the problem in the first place.

This bald summary does little to convey the interest or the complexity of the story. Paballo's predicament is graphically illustrated by the bundles which she and her niece carry on their heads. She feels ashamed that she has been reduced to this: whatever hopes and expectations she may have had for herself and her marriage have come to nothing. The story poses the question: what has reduced her to this desperate plight? Are there no remedies available to her – either in terms of her traditional culture or in terms of the modern urban world in which she finds herself? Does she find herself in this situation because she is a woman?

In her comments on *Footprints* (in her "Introduction" to the collection of stories, and in her article on Tlali in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*) Ngcobo quite rightly identifies an important shift in focus in Tlali's writing:

In this volume she turns her eyes on to her own community, focussing self-consciously for the African eyes only – on the wounds sustained in the collapse of our societies. Her eye lingers long and hard on the lives of women in particular. It is as though she has taken a step back to watch the devastation all around.

("Introduction" xvii)

However, she then goes on to suggest that "With her feet deeply planted in the city, her eyes look back on the lost warp of tradition. She indicates that city problems are due to the loss of traditions and peoples [sic] rootlessness" (xviii). This is at best a misleading over-simplification. Paballo does earnestly advocate a return to what one might call traditional family values: "If we throw away our rituals we are as good as dead. No one can succeed in destroying us if we know ourselves and those 'laws' that our ancestors have left us with" (15). She laments the failure of her aunt (Mm'a

Letia) to inculcate these values in her son and grandson, who are both dissolute and irresponsible: “She allows these young people to trample over her” (15). She lectures her niece on the importance of knowing who your relatives are so that you can turn to them for support: “It is important for you to know that you are not alone, that you are never an “orphan”. There is always someone in the “family” who is under obligation to “stand” by you” (14).⁶⁹ Unfortunately Paballo’s assertions are contradicted by the facts of her own case. She finds herself alone and unsupported, with no one to turn to but her niece Mahali (a reversal of the normal relationship). She in fact fears that Mahali may end up in the same situation as she is – without a home or the support of husband or family. The story demonstrates the seemingly irretrievable breakdown of the customs and traditions associated with the extended family: Paballo finds herself with little alternative but to accept the proverbial advice to “swallow the stone” and simply make the best of her lot as a married woman (21). While Paballo’s conflict with her husband may be caused partly by the conditions of township life (the “dreary match-box” (25)), his insistence on giving support and shelter to his parents is partly (or largely?) responsible for his wife’s predicament: they view her as their “ngoetsi” or “makoti” (daughter-in-law) – “something with no feelings like a stone!” (21). Ironically, Musi is only playing the part of a dutiful son!

Paballo’s (and perhaps Tlali’s) respect for traditional culture is consistent with Black Consciousness-inspired concerns to protect and value it, but the support system which is (or should be) built into the network of family relationships has in fact failed Paballo.⁷⁰ On a previous occasion, her husband’s people had been fined an ox, but the fine had never been paid. Mahali asks, very appositely, “What is the use if in-laws do not respect the rulings of the people?” (22). The story leaves one with no expectation that the planned family meeting will ever take place, or that the situation will be resolved: “She knew that she was back to square one. . . . It was becoming more and more difficult to work things ‘our way’ – the respectable traditional way” (25).

⁶⁹ This story could almost be subtitled “the education of Mahali”. The difference is that Mahali can draw little real comfort from the traditional prescriptions offered by Paballo. She is left to witness Paballo’s actual helplessness and eventual return to her husband’s house.

⁷⁰ The “man to man” confrontation which her brother envisages is not of course sanctioned by tradition; it is a desperate modern expedient. (In the event, the confrontation doesn’t take place as the husband is not at home.)

In particular (and contrary to the author's own stated views) the story does not promote motherhood, or celebrate the "strength" of women as mothers.⁷¹ It reveals the extent of Paballo's dependence on men (her brother and her husband in particular) – a dependence which has to do with both custom and legality. If anything, in this story Tlali is pointing to what Govinden calls "the complexity of motherhood, and separating myth from reality" (77). One of the "bundles" which Paballo carries is her three-year old son, Mzwandile, and the other "bundle" is the child quickening within her. Her response to her pregnancy is deeply conflicted: "The devastating confirmation . . . had left her confused and uncertain whether to laugh or cry" (17). She will have to stop working, further reducing her options and increasing her dependence on her husband. As she contemplates her situation, "the ground over which she was resting seemed to have shifted away" (18). The name Paballo means "one who cares or preserves", but there is little comfort or consolation to be derived from her traditional role as wife, mother and home-maker.⁷² If anything, work provides a welcome escape from the claustrophobic home, where the ever-present in-laws take her very much for granted. One cannot mistake the bitter irony of the final sentence: "Musi's people named [her new baby girl] Mm'a-lithoto, mother of bundles . . . yet another of Paballo's bundles of joy" (26). As various critics have observed, the irony is strongly reminiscent of the title of Buchi Emecheta's novel, *The Joys of Motherhood*.

To what do we attribute the "tears of bitterness" that well up in Paballo's eyes at one point (the phrase recalls the title of her earlier collection, *Mihloti*)? She finds herself caught between the demands of tradition and custom (with their very obvious patriarchal bias) on the one hand, while on the other hand she is also subject to the oppression of the apartheid system. If she accepts her traditional gendered role as wife and mother, she must swallow her pride, put aside her own feelings, and simply perform her duty. If she tries to leave her husband, she will find herself alone and unsupported, and without a place to stay. She reproaches Mahali at one point for "speaking like a child":

You think it's easy for a woman like myself (or a man for that matter) just to bolt out when it is tough and get yourself another place? What

⁷¹ This point is made by Govinden ("Claiming the Right to Speak" 77).

⁷² Significantly, Musi means "the one who rules". I am grateful to my colleague Hale Tsehlana for assistance with decoding the names and understanding some of the proverbial saying in *Footprints*.

about the law? What about the whole set-up of locations and superintendents and black-jacks and waiting lists and so on? Besides, under the law, I would have to get my husband's permission. What if he should refuse . . . ?

(18)

Her story effectively dramatises her no-win situation as a black woman, subject both to custom and convention, and to the oppression of apartheid. Mahali, with her naïve suggestions⁷³ and her optimism, functions as a kind of youthful alter ego. In spite of their differences in age and status, the two women are able to offer each other the kind of support and understanding that seems unavailable elsewhere. The story is a kind of cautionary tale: Paballo's situation could be that of any black woman in South Africa. Mahali experiences a moment of recognition midway through the story, when she asks herself: "What does being a woman mean to everybody, to the laws anyway?" (19). The "tears of remorse" that fill her eyes are the counterpart to the "tears of bitterness" that well up later in Paballo's eyes. Both women are groping towards the recognition that their predicament has everything to do with their position and status as *women* in this society. As Govinden points out, the story implicitly challenges "sexist structures" (76) and reveals that Paballo's entrapment as "real and complex" (77). To describe it (as Driver does) as an example of "feminist testifying" does not do justice to the depth and subtlety with which Paballo's situation is represented ("Review" 52). Govinden sums up Tlali's achievement in these stories as follows:

With stark realism Tlali confronts the present in all its complexity, with its multiple battles – domestic, public, traditional, political, ideological – in diverse and intersecting centripetal and centrifugal configurations, and presenting not "spectacle" nor "abstractions" (Ndebele 1991: 37), but day-to-day living.

(74)

What helps to give the story its "real-life" texture is the frequent recourse to proverbial sayings in either Sesotho or (occasionally) isiZulu. This closeness to the mother tongue suggests Paballo's continued investment in her own traditional culture, and conveys in very immediate terms the difficulty of her position: it is not easy to distance oneself from (let alone resist) ways of thinking and feeling which are so intimately a part of one's identity.

⁷³ "I would leave him immediately, honestly, Aunty" (19).

“Fudu-u-u-a” and “Masechaba’s Erring ‘Child’” are two stories in the collection which may come closer to “feminist testifying”. “Fudu-u-u-a” returns us to what is a familiar scenario – the hazards of commuting to and from work on township trains (compare Themba’s “Dube Train”, Mzamane’s “Dube Train Revisited”, Matshoba’s “Call me not a Man” – to cite some obvious examples). This time, however, we are given a different perspective on this “ordinary” experience: we share the experiences of three women (Dikeledi (Nkele), Ntombi and Mashadi) who derive comfort and support from each other. They constitute an intradiegetic audience for each other’s stories, for the confidences which they “whisper” to each other as they struggle for space amid the jostling crowds. The wider context of racial inequality and apartheid oppression is present in the story, but the burden of the story is the shared experience of these three women who are caught up in what is defined as “the ‘front line’ of a black woman’s battle for mere existence” (38). The story affirms the need for women to stand together and support each other, and this is linked to the assertion that all women are “mothers”: “Women, irrespective of whether they have children of their own or not, are always ‘mothers’”(40). This carries with it the authority of the narrator, who functions as a reliable surrogate for the implied author. The insistence on motherhood as a source of strength and authority is, as we have seen, consistent with Tlali’s own view, as expressed in interviews and elsewhere. The alliance that is struck between the two friends (Nkele and Ntombi) and Mashadi demonstrates the solidarity shown by women who share the same predicament: they address each other as “sister” and “whisper” together.

The repeated use of the term “whisper” suggests something which is a secret, or taboo. The “secret” is none other than the fact that their distress is caused, most immediately, by *black men* whose intrusive fingers probe their bodies and steal their money. This shameful fact contradicts the prevailing belief in a black community or “nation” united in the struggle against racial oppression. It undermines both patriarchal assertions of male responsibility and leadership and “womanist” notions of the need to support men.⁷⁴ According to Hunter, “Tlali is neither shoring up the image of men nor honouring the taboo against women’s voicing criticism of their menfolk” (“Women, Tradition and Change” 65). Driver points to the analogy in the story

⁷⁴ Wicomb notes that “Fudu-u-a” “explicitly undermines a basic tenet of womanism in its account of sexual abuse on the crowded trains” (“Variety of Discourses” 40-41).

between the treatment of blacks at the hands of whites (who “treat [them] *just like dogs*” (37)) and these women’s treatment at the hands of black men: “They just don’t care. They treat us exactly like animals” (42; “Review” 52). Although, as Wicomb points out, the abuse is hinted at in generalised terms – “there are no male characters, no actants who perpetrate the abuse” (41) – there is no doubting that “they” here refers primarily to black men. Wicomb does, however, make an important point when she refers to the need for concealment (or subterfuge), suggested by the use of the repeated word “whisper”: “Concealment, then, becomes a trope for the woman writer who has to negotiate the conflicting loyalties of race and gender” (“Variety of Discourses” 41).

Tlali rather adroitly appropriates the discourse of struggle (normally, as we have seen, the preserve of men) and applies it to the women’s everyday “tooth and nail fight for survival” (42). The three women find themselves “in the ‘front line’ of a black woman’s battle for mere existence” (37). “The very first battle” that Mashadi and Nkele fought cemented them “into practically a team of *comrades in action*” (my emphasis, 38). The women whom they observe “stirring the pot” are “veterans” who have become “tough and brave” (38). This is an audacious move on Tlali’s part, since it implies that there is another struggle to be fought, this time on the terrain of gender equality – and in this struggle it is black men who are the antagonists! This also undercuts the conventional distinction between the public (or the political) and the private (the domestic or the familial): gender relations are situated in the public domain.

The narrator’s lengthy intrusion late in the story (in a manner reminiscent of Matshoba) also employs the discourse of struggle, but here there is a reversion to a more orthodox nationalist or Black Consciousness position: the “moral strength” of “a whole proud nation” depends on women (as “mothers”) and the “young and the weak” must submit to their guidance. This echoes Tlali’s belief in the strength of woman as “mothers”, and is supported by recourse to proverbial wisdom: we are reminded that “‘M’a-Ngoana o tšoara thipa ka bohaleng’ (the child’s mother grabs the sharp end of the knife)” (40). This kind of slippage suggests the Tlali’s difficulty in maintaining a consistent position: her writing both unsettles and confirms familiar discourses. According to the narrator, the “black mothers” who “resort to the ecumenical spear” and sing Zionist hymns must be “forgiven” for allowing themselves to be deflected from the political struggle (“It is perhaps the only weapon they are familiar with”

(41)). A careful reading of Tlali's stories (which includes, at times, reading "against the grain") might suggest the use of other weapons in pursuit of a different struggle.

The title (which Tlali explains in a note to the story) suggests that in "stirring the pot" women *are* asserting themselves – and in so doing are departing from the subordinate roles conventionally assigned to them. The story's implicit (but powerful) plea is for others to make space for them, to acknowledge them, and *listen* to them. The hope is that they may not always have to resort to "whispering", that a time will come when they are able to break the silence and speak out. According to Wicomb, "The contextual meaning of the title quietly transfers to the story and whispers its plea. . . . [What Tlali's story does is] to stir that which an official policy keeps still, in order that a new space can be created for the crushed and degraded female to articulate her plight" ("Variety of Discourses" 41).

The most overtly "feminist" of Tlali's stories, "'Masechaba's Erring Child", is also the final story in *Footprints*. This story interrogates traditional gender roles and foregrounds marital relationships in a way which no previous work of Tlali's has done. This story is also a "dilemma" story, but here the dilemma is resolved: at the end of the story 'Masechaba recognises the error of her ways and begins to take responsibility for her own life. Because the story conducts its argument in a consistent and explicit way, explication is hardly necessary: the reader can hardly fail to grasp the message conveyed by 'Masechaba's two "mentors", Tholoane and Lindiwe. These two younger women represent attitudes to marriage and gender equality which have become normative for many women in Western societies, and which many readers might regard as "enlightened" or "emancipated". Her two friends pinpoint the assumptions and attitudes which have led 'Masechaba to accept a subservient and unquestioning role in relation to her husband, Senatla, whom she refers to throughout as "Ntate" (in keeping with traditional practice): her view is that "it is the husband's wishes which are important, not the woman's" (152). Lindi points out that "A woman is also a person" and comments on the double standard (with regard to marital infidelity) that 'Masechaba apparently accepts. Tholoane comments on 'Masechaba's selfish disregard of her as a person (in apparently consenting to her husband's pursuit of her): "This mere 'object'. . . happened, in this case, to be me" (156). Lindi and Tholoane's take the view that marriage is an equal partnership between two "loving companion[s]" who share their lives (and the domestic chores)

and have no secrets from each other – a view that conforms to best Western (or modern?) practice!

It should be recognised, however, that 'Masechaba is not simply an unthinking adherent of traditional practices: she has her own quite well-argued rationalisation for her actions, which are premised on a quite different conception of marriage. For her marriage is a kind of bargain: the woman makes certain concessions in return for the security of knowing that her husband won't leave her – and is rewarded with a well-stocked fridge and the license to buy clothes. Everyone (apparently) is happy: the wife does not have to “put up with a grumpy, morose person”, and the husband is free to pursue his sexual conquests – so long as this doesn't threaten the marriage. The fact that the wife knows and approves of her husband's bed partners even gives her a measure of control. 'Masechaba takes a much less flattering or sanguine view of men than do her two friends: she sees them as weak, fallible, liable to stray and in need of indulgence. For all that she calls her husband “Ntate”, he is also her “erring child” whom she comforts and mothers.⁷⁵ Govinden points to her “complicity in her own infantilised state” (75), but she also infantilises her husband. Unfortunately for 'Masechaba, the bargain is rather one-sided: her husband can virtually do as he pleases, while her own freedom is severely constrained. She is unable to drive a car, or run her own business, or take charge of her own finances (let alone take a lover!). She is also uninformed about the world and lacks political insight (she leaves the reading of the newspapers to her husband). She eventually discovers – with the help of her two friends – that her husband has sold the property he had promised her, and as disillusionment sets in she takes the first steps towards reclaiming her life. The fact that 'Masechaba is allowed some space to express her views (however unemancipated these may seem) and engage in argument makes the story less of a textbook exposition that it might otherwise have been.

Two further points may be made: by exposing 'Masechaba's views to critical scrutiny, Tlali in effect distances herself from the “womanism” that she at times seems to espouse. According the Ogunyemi, “The intelligent [sic] black woman writer, conscious of black impotence in the context of white patriarchal culture, empowers the black man. She believes in him; hence her books end in integrative

⁷⁵ Hunter notes, however, that in this story “the mystified power of the mother seems to have suffered some dissipation” (“Women, Tradition and Change” 71). She points out that 'Masechaba's two “mentors” make no reference to the concept “mother” or to biological motherhood. In fact, there is no evidence to suggest that she and Senatla have children.

images of the male and female worlds”.⁷⁶ This is manifestly not the position of the implied author in this story. At the end, the verdict is unequivocal: “The truth stared [’Masechaba] in the face: the man she had trusted and worshipped had betrayed her” (161). What emerges from this and other stories is the need for solidarity or “sisterhood” between women – hence Tholoane’s anger at ’Masechaba’s betrayal of her (156-57).

Secondly, an important (if implicit) link is made between the struggle for gender equality and the political struggle. Tholoane’s boyfriend is a political activist who is committed to fighting for the freedom of all black South Africans: “‘My man believes in the freedom of the individual, in trust and faith in the one you love. He does not believe in tying anyone in chains’” (160). Clearly, freedom is indivisible: one cannot be committed to the struggle for political liberation without also being committed to the struggle for gender equality. This also suggests a revision of Tlali’s earlier, more orthodox position, which had seemed to grant priority to the liberation struggle. (The obvious comparisons here are with “Point of no Return” and with *Amandla*.)

Situating Tlali’s work in relation to that of other black male writers throws into relief the failure of most of these writers to explore gendered subjectivity, or the sexism that seems to be prevalent in their communities. An alternative approach would be to place Tlali within a developing tradition of black women’s writing in South Africa – a tradition that would obviously include Noni Jabavu, Bessie Head, Ellen Kuzwayo, Lauretta Ngcobo, Gcina Mhlope and Zoë Wicomb (among others). This would create a different, and in some ways perhaps more rewarding, context for the reception of her work. Her stories explore the predicament of black women who are, as Govinden puts it, “caught in a web of survival and contestation, and . . . searching for ways of reclaiming their voices in untenable situations” (“Claiming the Right to Speak” 79). Her approach to storytelling does, however, have something in common with Matshoba’s (in spite of the obvious differences); Vaughan’s comment on Matshoba– that he “concentrates on situation” and that each story “has an exemplary quality” could be transferred unaltered to Tlali (“The Stories of Mtutuzeli Matshoba” 45).

⁷⁶ Lockett quotes from Ogunyemi to illustrate the “womanist” position (“Feminism(s) and Writing” 16). Ogunyemi’s remarks were originally made in an article entitled “Womanism: the Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English” (*Signs* 11.1 (1985): 63-80).

As a *Staffrider* writer, Tlali was clearly swimming against the prevailing stream. As Gqola has shown, and as Matshoba's stories demonstrate, "the Blackness given voice in the magazine was predicated on Black male urban experiences" (Gqola 33). Gqola's study shows that female characters in *Staffrider* stories are invariably "cast in supportive roles, as mothers and wives of jailed or slain activists who are unwavering in their stoic support" and who are "invested with an ability to suffer passively which resonates with the widely documented Mother Africa stereotype in African literature" (36). This is precisely the supportive role in which Bongi is cast in "The Point of No Return" (but which she has some difficulty accepting); it is a role which the protagonists in other stories begin to resist or transform. Gqola comments on the near absence of female activists in the literature published in the first five years of *Staffrider*, and concludes that activism is "almost exclusively the domain of the male staffrider. Female readers [of *Staffrider*] are guided towards more passive and stereotypically female forms of inaction" (38). These remarks provide one measure of Tlali's significance: she is almost alone in exploring ways in which black women may challenge the dominant (nationalist, patriarchal) discourses, reclaim agency and begin to find a voice as conscious, active and (sometimes) resisting subjects. As one explores Tlali's work, the contradictions or tensions implicit in her position as a black/women/writer become ever more apparent.

CHAPTER 9: WRITING IN THE INTERREGNUM

Njabulo Ndebele has won widespread recognition, both for his critical writings and for his short story collection, *Fools and Other Stories*.¹ Anyone attempting to look seriously at black South African writing will find himself or herself entering into dialogue with Ndebele. The series of essays and articles he published in the course of the 1980s, collected as *The Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (1991), marks the emergence of an independent critical voice. Ndebele was not unique (his most important predecessors as self-reflexive critics and cultural analysts are H.I.E. Dhlomo, Es'kia Mphahlele and Lewis Nkosi) but his intervention came at a critical moment and anticipated the kind of rethinking that would mark the transition to democracy at the end of the decade – hence Pechey's reference to Ndebele as “a prophet of the post-apartheid condition” (1). Ndebele seeks to avoid entrapment, whether by the liberal establishment or by the familiar binaries of apartheid thought (white/black, oppressor/oppressed, good/evil); his criticism of black South African writing questions the (mis)representation of black South Africans as a “passive people whose only reason for existing seemed to be to receive the sympathy of the world” (“Noma Acceptance” 158).² This kind of misrepresentation is, in his view, associated with protest fiction, or with the literature of the “spectacular”:

The spectacular documents; it indicts implicitly; it is demonstrative, preferring exteriority to interiority; it keeps the larger issues of society in our minds, obliterating the details; it provokes identification through recognition and feeling rather than through observation and analytical thought; it calls for emotion rather than conviction; it establishes a vast sense of presence without offering intimate knowledge; it confirms without necessarily offering a challenge. It is the literature of the powerless identifying the key factor responsible for their powerlessness. Nothing beyond this can be expected of it.
(“The Rediscovery of the Ordinary” 46)

The discussion of the “protest literature” of the 1950s and early 1960s questioned some of Ndebele's more sweeping (and perhaps deliberately provocative) assertions about black writing. His criticism can be seen as, on the one hand, a product of his own attempt as a

¹ Subsequent reference to stories in this collection will be indicated by page numbers in brackets in the text. *Fools* received the 1984 Noma Award for fiction.

creative writer to avoid the stereotypical representations that characterise some black writing in English; at the same time, by questioning existing conventions and assumptions, he is preparing the way for the reception of his own stories.

This discussion of *Fools and Other Stories* focuses on the tension in his work between tradition and modernity; it also examines his work in relation to that of the more obviously Black Consciousness-inspired *Staffrider* writers who were the subject of the previous chapter. Morphet has discussed the complex discursive position which Ndebele occupies, and traces his indebtedness to the traditions of “Romantic Nationalism” on the one hand and “Enlightenment universalism” on the other (“Ordinary – Modern – Post-modern” 135). This does not, however, reveal what is distinctive about Ndebele’s position – it could describe the position of most exponents of African nationalism, in particular the mainstream ANC position, in South Africa. This discussion will focus on Ndebele’s indebtedness to the particular form that “romantic nationalism” took in the 1970s – Black Consciousness. While Ndebele is critical of much of the overtly political writing of the 1970s, Black Consciousness is clearly a formative influence on his own thought and writing.

The distinction that Ndebele makes between “actors” (who give direct expression to popular township culture) and “interpreters” (a more elite or professional group) points to a central tension in Ndebele’s own work (“Actors and Interpreters” 88). According to Ndebele, black writers in South Africa tend to write from “above” rather than from “below” (92), and to provide “instruction” or “a largely descriptive documentation of suffering” (“Noma Acceptance” 158), rather than an exploration of “social processes” (“Turkish Tales” 23). Such writing, he says, is overtly political, and its value is seen to reside in its message. “The result is not knowledge but indictment” (“Turkish Tales” 23). Ndebele views the work of Matshoba in this light (“Turkish Tales” 27). Ndebele is himself, of course, an “interpreter”, and it seems appropriate consider his own work in the light of these comments. Does one find in his stories the “close dialectical relationship” that (he argues) should exist between “actors” and “interpreters”? To what extent is his own imagination “grounded in popular experience” (“Actors and Interpreters” 87) – or in what he calls the “ordinary”? In what sense is he a “storyteller”? I take as my point of departure Vaughan’s article, “Storytelling and Politics in Fiction”.

² Unless otherwise stated, page references are the collection of essays entitled *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*. I retain in short form the title of the particular essay.

For Ndebele, “storytelling” is a mode that is “rooted firmly in a timeless tradition” (“Turkish Tales” 14), and has the “impersonal communal quality of the traditional tale” (15). The result, for the reader, is “a kind of understanding that is much deeper than any direct ‘message’ or ‘instruction’” (“Turkish Tales” 18). Vaughan argues that while the oral culture of the township contributes to the “subject matter” of Ndebele’s stories, in terms of form or narrative style they owe little to oral storytelling traditions. He suggests that for Ndebele the term “storytelling” can mean either “skilful composition” or “closeness to traditional oral narratives” (“Storytelling and Politics” 188). Ndebele is, according to Vaughan, “a skilful composer of stories in a Western, realist tradition of storytelling” (188). This seems fair comment: his stories are consciously and carefully crafted; they are designed to explore the subjectivity of his protagonists as they struggle to come to terms with the world in which they find themselves. They illustrate Ndebele’s view that the aim is “not to avoid interiority, but to render it *as concretely as possible* within the unfolding logic of narrative” (“Turkish Tales” 29). This careful, sustained exploration of interiority is foreign to both traditional and modern oral narratives: “I have listened to countless storytellers on the buses and trains carrying people to and from work in South Africa,” says Ndebele. “The majority of them have woven masterpieces of entertainment and instruction” (“Turkish Tales” 32). These stories were often quite apolitical: “When they talked politics, they talked politics,” says Ndebele; “when they told stories, they told stories” (“Turkish Tales” 32). As Vaughan points out, the *subject matter* of oral narratives does enter into Ndebele’s stories - both the prophetess and Nzule, for example, are figures of local township folklore - but the stories are concerned to problematise the relation of the protagonist to this township milieu.

Vaughan identifies the central theme in Ndebele’s stories as “the problem of identity . . . ; the problem of negotiating the total culture of the African township” (186). This is precisely the problem that faces the “interpreter”. Without exception, his protagonists (like Ndebele himself) come from privileged, middle-class backgrounds: the mother is a nurse, and the father a teacher, headmaster, or school inspector. The parents often distance themselves from the more working-class culture of the township (the culture of the street).³

³ Although Ndebele’s stories are not autobiographical in a literal sense, they are clearly informed by his own family background and circumstances. He explains (in an interview with Jane Wilkinson) that his own family environment was ‘fairly comfortable’ with ‘plenty of books in the house, plenty of music, plenty of culture’ (147). His father was a teacher and his mother a registered nurse. He adds, significantly, that they were never ‘closed off from the community’ and that they lived in a ‘socially rich environment’ (147, 148).

In the first story, “The Test”, Thoba’s activities are strictly regulated by his parents, and he is made acutely aware of the class difference that separates him from the other boys. His friends’ feet are “deeply cracked,” while his are not:

Thoba remembered that he had three pairs of shoes, and his mother had always told him to count his blessings because most boys had only one pair, if any shoes at all Yet Thoba yearned to have cracked feet too. So whenever his father and mother were away from home, he would go out and play without his shoes.

(5)

“Thoba yearned to have cracked feet too.” This defines the recurring dilemma of the protagonists in these stories, who want nothing more than to be liked and accepted by their peers. When Thoba claims that his own father doesn’t just get ill (14), the other boys burst out laughing:

“What is he telling us, this one?” said Mpiyahke in the middle of a guffaw. “Your family gets knocked down with all kinds of diseases. Everybody knows that. Softies, all of you. You’re too higher-up. That’s your problem. Instead of eating *papa* and beans, you have too many sandwiches.”

(14)

It is this problematic status (as “too higher up”) that each story explores with tact and sensitivity. The task of the protagonist is to reconcile the often conflicting claims of “home and the “street” - a conflict which assumes its most extreme form in “The Music of the Violin”. J.M. Coetzee observes that “*street* and *home* are the two opposing zones in which Ndebele’s stories are played out. Home is the zone of order and security, usually created by the hard work and self-sacrifice of a woman. The street, contested by criminal gangs and police patrols, is a zone of disorder and insecurity, though also of vitality” (37). The stories balance the rival claims of “street” and “home”, and implicitly question the more restrictive, respectable, middle-class attitudes associated with “home”. Ndebele’s stories in fact provide an insightful critique of the often alienating effects of class formation and the assimilation of Western values in a post-colonial context.⁴

⁴ In this respect, they anticipate Wicomb’s *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town*.

Vaughan also argues that “the sophisticated scepticism of the narrative voice” is “transmitted to the ‘inner life’ of the protagonist” and “serves to liberate [him], at least provisionally, from the authority of custom, convention, traditional belief” (190). Is this in fact the case? The narrator avoids explicit commentary, and simply presents the unfolding “inner” drama, using a style and syntax which is close to that of the youthful protagonists. A striking feature of the stories is their sympathetic rendering of the dilemma of the protagonist, whose thoughts and feelings are revealed through reported interior monologue. In what is perhaps the central story of the collection, “Uncle,” the protagonist is also the first-person narrator.

Vaughan supports his argument by referring to “The Prophetess” and the “teasing ambiguity” with which the supposed magical powers of the prophetess are presented. He concedes that the narrative treats her with “a certain reverence”, but concludes that “in the end there is no doubt of the narrative’s scepticism, its secular ‘realism’” (“Storytelling and Politics” 191). He sees the conclusion as evidence of this scepticism: the boy substitutes ordinary tap water for the prophetess’s “holy” water - with no apparent loss of its healing power. One could, however, read this as confirmation of the prophetess’s powers: when she lays hands on the boy she seems to transmit some of her power to him, and he carries out her injunction: ““Go and heal your mother”” (44). Arguably, the story demonstrates the power of belief: at the end we are left with the paradox of a nurse (the boy’s mother), trained in the scientific procedures of Western medicine, affirming her faith in traditional herbal remedies and the cultural traditions of her people. Nor is it certain that the “defiant scepticism” of the woman in the bus reflects the view of the narrator (or the implied author). Hers is a minority voice, and the “immaculately dressed” and well-educated young man who intervenes on her behalf could be seen as a “too know” young man (Achebe, *No Longer at Ease* 43) – a member of the educated elite who is too removed from and too scornful of the feelings and perceptions of ordinary people.⁵

Losambe’s reading differs strikingly from Vaughan’s: for him the young man’s challenge represents “the blind and exclusive adoption of an alien order of discourse” (87). He takes the view that the validity of popular beliefs about the prophetess “cannot be contested” (87). His central point (contra Vaughan) is that

⁵ His intervention in fact prefigures Zamani’s unsuccessful attempts at political intervention in the title story, “Fools”.

“history and tradition function as important restorative factors in the lives of the oppressed in Ndebele’s fiction” (77). In general, Ndebele’s stories do affirm the importance of retaining contact with indigenous cultural traditions and values. Helgesson’s reading of the story is helpful: “The prophetess and her water, or what is taken to be her water, stand as signifiers for the self-respect and communal sharing that is the innermost value of subaltern culture in Ndebele’s stories” (52).⁶ Ndebele’s stories expose the (actual or potential) alienation and estrangement of an educated colonised elite (the “interpreters”), and affirm the existence of continuities with the traditional (African) culture. Far from expressing a “sophisticated scepticism towards [traditional] customs, conventions and beliefs” (192), they in fact subject Eurocentric attitudes and values to a searching critique. According to Maithufi, “The collection as a whole centres on this theme of black alienation under modernity” (141). In all of this, Ndebele is acting as a vector for the affirmation of African cultural values and traditions that was central to Black Consciousness thinking.⁷

“Uncle” provides compelling evidence of the need to remain in touch with one’s cultural values and traditions.⁸ Through his presence and example, Uncle serves as mentor, guide and confidant to his young nephew, who is making the transition to manhood. While Uncle’s role may be prescribed in part by tradition, he transforms this into something deeply meaningful. For Uncle, knowing who you are means understanding and acknowledging your origins, your family and your cultural traditions. As Titlestad puts it, “[Uncle’s] guidance takes the form of initiating and elaborating an intricate web of intellectual, spiritual and political possibility” – one that is intended to “unravel the disabling assumptions of a ‘colonised consciousness’” (208). On their first evening together Uncle sits next to his *mshana* and they look at the map of South Africa in his school atlas:

⁶ Significantly it is often the women - the prophetess, the young boy’s mother, Zamani’s wife Nosipho - who can entertain both ‘Western’ and traditional forms of knowledge. Helgesson’s term for this is ‘cognitive ambivalence’ (53).

⁷ In neither his fiction nor his critical writing does Ndebele propose an unthinking adherence to traditional norms and values (this would clearly be impossible); he is, however, suggesting that they should not be simply abandoned or jettisoned. He is himself, of course, an interpreter, and is attempting to reconcile the claims of tradition and modernity. It is very possible that in his use of the term “interpreter”, Ndebele has in mind Soyinka’s novel, *The Interpreters* (1965).

⁸ Mackenzie refers to “Uncle” as “undoubtedly the masterpiece of the collection” and as more representative of the collection as a whole than the title story “Fools” (23).

Show me Bloemfontein . . . yes That is where your grandmother and grandfather are. Your uncles. Your younger mothers. They are all there. That is the centre of your life too. Your mother had to come home before you were born because you were her first born. And that is where I buried your umbilical cord. Right there in the yard. Wherever you are in the world, you must return to that yard.

(66)

Later in the story he explains to his nephew: ““You are not alone in the world. Everywhere you go, your people will take care of you”” (99).⁹ It is his security in his own identity that enables Uncle to experiment, to disappear for long periods, to pursue his vocation as a musician - and yet never lose touch with ordinary people, and with the culture of the township. He explains what had led him to reject his father’s vocation (as a minister in the church) and to follow his own calling. ““His message did not reverberate with the strength of our own experience. . . . *Mshana*, I have what he never had, your grandfather. I have always been close to people”” (104). This critique of his father’s ministry is confirmed by the figure of the prophetess in the earlier story: She is a syncretic figure, who combines or synthesises the Christian gospel with elements of traditional religious practice and belief. She expresses herself simply and directly, using imagery that is accessible. The God she prays to is a God of power who can “break the chains of despair” (43) and bring forth life from “barren wastes” (41). Like Uncle, she is a source of wisdom and knowledge: her words “reverberate” because they draw on and speak to the experience of ordinary people.

Uncle also demonstrates the value of history to his nephew. He recalls the defeat of the Boers by the Basotho at Thaba Bosiu: ““Their guns, their cannons, were nothing compared to the terrible descent of the rocks”” (98). As Mackenzie points out, “Uncle evokes here a glorious, noble past of wisdom, resourcefulness and courage” (25). This preoccupation with history is something Ndebele shares with Matshoba, and reflects their common investment in Black Consciousness perspectives. They also share a didactic impulse – although in Ndebele’s case this is contained within the fictional frame of his stories (something which rescues them from overt didacticism). Uncle’s encounter with Nzule, for example, has an exemplary quality, and constitutes

⁹ This strikingly echoes the advice given by Paballo to her niece, Mahali, in “Mm’a-Lithoto” (14) – evidence of the influence of Black Consciousness-inspired cultural revaluation on both Tlali and Ndebele.

a test of his courage and ingenuity, as well as a test of his nephew's loyalty.¹⁰ This episode in fact takes on the allegorical dimension of a David versus Goliath struggle (the warrior Nzule seems invincible with his weapons; Uncle has only his pile of stones). Uncle explains to his nephew that, had stones not been available, he could easily have blinded Nzule with sand: "You see, for him everything was in his weapons. *Mshana*, the simple is always decisively surprising" (98).

"Everything was in his weapons." Given the political context of South Africa in the late 1960s, the implications are surely fairly clear: the African people are not a defeated people; they can find within themselves the strength and the resources to defeat an apparently much more powerful enemy - and they can do this partly by drawing on their own cultural resources, and by identifying key moments and actors in a history of struggle and resistance. (Rocks and stones were sufficient to defeat the Boers at Thaba Bosiu.)¹¹ These stories are clearly indebted to the Black Consciousness movement, with its message of self-reliance and self-assertion, and its deliberate fostering of pride in black cultural traditions and history. Vaughan's comment on Matshoba's stories - that "Black Consciousness provides a pervasive cultural assertion" - might also be applied to Ndebele's (apparently very different) stories with little risk of exaggeration. Coetzee acknowledges the influence of Black Consciousness on Ndebele in his review of *Fools*:

A lonely figure in a somnolent township, Zani brings with him strange new ideas that we now recognise as tenets of the Black Consciousness movement, ideas about the antiquity and continuity of African thought, about a time-perspective in which Western colonialism and Western Christianity are only a transitory episode in African history.

(37)

Although Ndebele's carefully crafted narratives, with their foregrounding of "ordinary" experience and their exploration of interiority, may seem diametrically opposed to Matshoba's overtly didactic testimonies, they are in fact both concerned to

¹⁰ "I feel sorry for Nzule. I feel like crying. . . . He is no hero anymore. . . . I did not like the way he looked when he was running away. Oh Nzule, I want to be friend's with you" (94). This is, of course, another instance of the kind of conflict which Ndebele's protagonists have to negotiate.

¹¹ I acknowledge that this reading may appear to be counter-intuitive, since Nzule is himself a figure rooted in tradition (but one that is now anachronistic and unhelpful). The era of primary resistance is in the distant past, and new methods and tactics have to be found (this is, I think, Uncle's point). It was the achievement of the Black Consciousness movement to do exactly this. If one translates the figure of

promote the “inward-looking process” that leads to self-understanding and political awareness (Biko, “We Blacks” 29).

The twin themes of vocation and education which help to unify the stories in *Fools* are consistent with the need (identified by Biko et al) to undo the psychological and ideological consequences of colonisation. What was at stake, according to Biko, was the shaping of the minds of a generation of black children: “No wonder the African child learns to hate his heritage in his days at school. So negative is the image presented to him that he tends to find solace only in close identification with white society” (Biko, “We Blacks” 29).

The story that is most obviously shaped by these concerns is “The Music of the Violin”. One focus of *Fools* is the dynamics of the mother-son-father relationship. In these stories, masculinity is not defined exclusively in terms of strength, or domination, or the denial of feeling. For young Thoba, bravery may mean “forgetting about one’s mother” (20), but there is also a questioning of the kind of “masculine” bravado and sexism (exemplified by the “warrior”, Nzule, or by the young tsotsis-in-the-making, the children of the “street” who recur throughout the collection).¹² In “The Prophetess”, the young male protagonist acknowledges his love for his mother, and helps to heal her. In “Uncle”, the narrator kneels down and bathes his mother’s feet. In “The Music of the Violin”, however, we have a mother who exacts obedience and violates her children’s feelings - thereby contradicting every tenet of a humane, nurturing, person-centred culture. What has turned her into this virago? It becomes clear that what drives her is a desperate desire to prove that she is in effect as good as any white person.¹³ She has so thoroughly assimilated and internalised the values of white, middle-class society that she no longer recognises herself as African, and in her most extreme moment denounces her own children as “kaffir children” (132). By measuring her against the implicit norms of the other stories, one can see how atypical her attitudes and behaviour are. One example is the tirade she directs at her husband:

“Relatives,” his mother had come out eventually, “can be a real nuisance. Once you have opened the door, they come trooping in like

Nzule into the political context of South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, he bears a striking resemblance to an Inkatha warrior, brandishing his traditional weapons.

¹² The psycho-sexual dynamics of the young boy’s growth to maturity, and his problematic relationship with both mother and father, are explored in Ten Kortenaar’s “Parents, Children and *Fools*”.

¹³ We learn that Vukani’s mother “never tired of telling him how lucky he was. . . . This room is as good as any white boy’s” (132).

ants. We cannot afford it these days. Not with the cost of living. These are different times. Whites saw this problem a long time ago. That is why they have very little time for relatives. Nuclear family: That's what matters!" (148)

This can be contrasted with the young boy's vision of "a beach full of relatives" in "Uncle" (63), or with the comment of Vukani's friend Doksi:

"It's nice to have many relatives. Then when you are in trouble at home, you can always hide with one of them. And your father will go from relative to relative looking for you. When he finds you, he will be all smiles, trying to please the relatives." (148)

However privileged he may be in material terms, this is a resource which is denied Vukani. The story as a whole dramatises his inner conflict, caught between the conflicting demands of "home" and the "street". The overheard snatches of dialogue between his parents and their visitors, Dr Zwane and his wife, establish the values associated with "home" – and foreground the issue of education. (At one point the father refers disparagingly to "these bush schools" which fail to carry out the department's directives (127)). To what extent is his father an unwitting agent of an ideology designed to inculcate an acceptance of inferiority and subordination?¹⁴ Vukani's parents' error is to equate the standards of white, Western, bourgeois society with "civilisation" and "culture".¹⁵ Their visitors prescribe ballet lessons for their daughter, while Vukani – "our Mozart" – plays the violin – "a most wonderful instrument" (130). Mrs Zwane argues that it is the duty of school inspectors (like Vukani's father) to ensure that things such as ballet and classical music are taught in black schools. Vukani's father agrees:

"Indeed," agreed Vukani's father. "But do you think the Boers would agree? Never? Remember they say that Western Civilisation is spoiling

¹⁴ The point is reinforced by the homework assignment we see Vukani working at, which requires him to respond to questions such as, 'How did the coming of the whites lead to the establishment of prosperity and peace among the various Bantu tribes' (124). It is also reinforced by the incident involving teacher Masondo (132-133).

¹⁵ In this respect they are victims of a process initiated by the missionaries, the primary agents of cultural colonization. One of the ironies of "Bantu Education" is that by taking over the schools run by missionaries (or closing them down) the state unwittingly prepared the way for a new generation of schoolchildren who were receptive to the message of Black Consciousness.

us, and so we have to cultivate the indigenous way of life.”
(143)

On the one hand Vukani’s parents (and the Zwanes) are reacting against an ideology which seeks to “retribalise” urban Africans, to impose to a narrow ethnic identity, and to limit exposure to Western culture and access to education in its broader sense. Their rejection of this strategy of containment is understandable, but in the process they turn their backs on their own cultural traditions and values and embrace anything associated with “white” culture and respectability. It is this uncritical and superficial appropriation of Western individualism and bourgeois norms that the story as a whole is designed to expose and satirise. The mother’s desperate eagerness to acquire Mrs Kaplinsky’s recipes is (implicitly) held up to ridicule. When one of the men ventures a criticism, Dorcas replies, “How can you say such a thing? People like Mrs Kaplinsky are very good friends of ours. Some of her best friends are Africans” (129).¹⁶ She feels grateful and proud to be the object of this liberal patronage. The scene illustrates the Black Consciousness critique of white liberals, who hold out the prospect of limited and conditional acceptance into non-racial society.¹⁷ The effect is co-opt the emergent black middle class (represented here by Vukani’s parents), and thereby neutralise any threat that they might pose to the status quo. This is what Biko had to say about “integration”:

Does this mean that I am against integration? If by integration you understand a breakthrough into white society by blacks, an assimilation and acceptance of blacks into an already established set of norms and code of behaviour set up by and maintained by whites, then YES I am against it. . . . I am against the fact that a settler minority should impose an entire system of values on an indigenous people.
(“Black Souls in White Skins” 24)

It is this uncritical embrace of “an entire system of values” that this story exposes to critical scrutiny. Ndebele comments explicitly on this issue in his Sol T. Plaatje memorial lecture, “Actors and Interpreters”:

¹⁶ One cannot miss the deliberate echo of the standard liberal claim to non-racism!

¹⁷ As we have seen, this was an offer that an earlier generation of writers and intellectuals found difficulty in resisting.

The essence of the problem is this: if we define success, for example, according to the standards and formulation of the oppressor . . . then we have, in a very fundamental manner, become the oppressor. He can even give us independence. And this is because we may not have been able to transcend oppression in its most insidious and dangerous ideological form: language and a complex of socio-cultural codes slowly legitimised over a period of time until they become part and parcel of what is normal. (76-77)

Biko's insight – that “the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed” - clearly informs much of Ndebele's own thinking (“White Racism and Black Consciousness” 68). For Vukani's mother, “blackness” is the sign of inferiority and backwardness, while “whiteness” signifies civility, culture and respectability.¹⁸ Her own daughter accuses her of being “a white black woman, a slave of things” (146); when she refers to her own children as “kaffir children” and to the children of the township as “animals, absolutely raw” (105) she is a victim of the pathology of racism.¹⁹ Vukani's painful dilemma is clear: the more he conforms to his parents' expectations, the more he alienates himself from his peers and from the culture of the township. For him the violin has become “the intolerable badge of a foreign culture and a suspect class” (Coetzee 37). At the end of the story his mother has stepped over the limits of what is humanly acceptable, and she flees to her bedroom, where her sobbing turns into “the wail of the bereaved” (151). She has finally alienated herself from her own family - and estranged herself from the norms and values of her own culture.

This does not, however, mean that Ndebele himself endorses a Manichean view of culture, in which the “black” or “indigenous” culture is uncritically endorsed and the “white” or “western” culture (the culture of the coloniser) is rejected. The culture of the township - or what Ndebele (like Biko) refers to as “modern African culture” - is itself a hybrid product in which various influences merge or interact. The violin - in Vukani's hands - is an instrument devoted exclusively to the transmission of Western classical music, and there is no meeting point with the wider culture of the

¹⁸ It was of course the project of Black Consciousness to reverse this equation and convert “blackness” into a positive term.

¹⁹ The alienation of the black man who “rejects himself” had been identified and described by Biko, who is indebted to Fanon: “You begin to feel that there is something incomplete in your humanity, and that completeness goes with whiteness” (“What is Black Consciousness?” (100, 101)).

township.²⁰ Hence his violin is “a constant source of wonder and ridicule. ““Here’s a fellow with a strange guitar!’ some would say” (133). Bhuka’s gang greet him with the salutation, ““Hey, music man”” (137) - but when they ask him to play a popular township hit, Vukani is helpless: ““I have to learn how to play it first”” (140). His helplessness contrasts with Uncle’s mastery of a musical idiom - jazz - that has its roots in African-American cultural experience and has been assimilated to the traditions of township music; the result is a distinctively South African product - township jazz (*marabi*, *mbaqanga*²¹) - that combines various musical and cultural influences. It is also not restricted in its appeal to a particular class or group, as the triumphant finale of “Uncle” demonstrates.

It is a Sunday afternoon, and the narrator wakes up from his afternoon sleep to the sound of “music, many voices, and screams and laughter” (119). He gets up and rushes out: “It’s all happening right here in my home. . . . The gramophone is playing, and Uncle is playing, and people are dancing in the street” (120). Uncle spots three men walking across a field on their way back to the mine: one is playing a guitar, another a concertina, and the third a mouth organ, and they are doing the *setapo* dance. He calls them to join in, and soon “everybody is doing the *setapo*” (121). The crowd swells, and they are joined by a wedding procession that is unable to get past. The story reaches a joyous climax with the *setapo* dance raising dust in the air, Mother passing around cool drink, and the sun going down. The narrator’s final words are, ““Oh, Uncle, everybody is here”” (123). What we have here is a carnivalesque celebration of spontaneity, of vitality, of togetherness - a demonstration of the inclusive culture of the township. It reveals black South Africans as “makers of culture in their own right” (“Turkish Tales” 33). It reflects Ndebele’s own attempt as a writer to “consolidate a sense of a viable, self-sufficient community among the oppressed” (“Redefining Relevance” 71). Uncle is himself what Ndebele calls an “interpreter,” and the scene demonstrates the “dialectical relationship” that should exist between musicians or artists or writers on the one hand, and the popular culture of the township on the other hand. It supports Ndebele’s view that South African

²⁰ Compare the use to which the violin is put by the Soweto String Quartet.

²¹ *Marabi* was a product of the shebeen culture of the 1920s and 1930s, and was associated in particular with the inner-city slumyards of Johannesburg. It drew on the syncretic forms that preceded it, which were often associated with specific ethnic groups. *Mbaqanga* was originally a Zulu term for a traditional steamed maize bread. “Among musicians, it meant that the music was both the Africans’

writers should not only grapple with the demands of their art and its medium; they should also “cultivate a total interest in their community” (“Actors and Interpreters” 95).²²

In tracing the influence of Black Consciousness on Ndebele’s thought and fiction, one is aware of an obvious paradox: his writing differs in most respects from that of the post-1976 *Staffrider* writers. Like Mzamane, he was born into a privileged middle-class family; his father was a writer (author of the first published Zulu play) and school teacher; as a result, Ndebele did not lack access to books, newspapers or literary journals. Like Mzamane, he was sent to Swaziland (to Saint Christopher’s High School) for his secondary school education. After graduating from university (in Lesotho), he embarked on an academic career which took him to Cambridge University and to the University of Denver in the United States (his doctorate was awarded for the stories published subsequently as *Fools and Other Stories*). Ndebele was never part of a township writers’ group, and was outside of the country (albeit just beyond the border in Lesotho) for most of the turbulent 1970s. His trajectory is very different from that of Matshoba, who was an active participant in the unfolding political drama of the period, and whose work speaks of his rootedness in Soweto. Mutloatse articulates the anger of the *Staffrider* generation, and their defiance of (among other things) literary convention or artifice: “We will have to *donder* conventional literature: old-fashioned critic and reader alike. We are going to pee, spit and shit on literary convention before we are through . . .” (5).²³ The so-called Soweto novels, which document and celebrate the forging of a collective identity in the heat of struggle, and Matshoba’s mixed-mode narratives seem at a far remove from Ndebele’s own carefully crafted explorations of individual subjectivity and identity.²⁴ Significantly, what the “Soweto novels” do *not* do is explore the psychic

own, the homely cultural substance of the townships, and the popular working class source of the musicians’ ‘daily bread’” (Coplan 95, 161).

²² Titlestad suggests that Uncle’s trumpet-playing is represented in “distinctly shamanic terms”. He can “breathe in ‘everything’, including the congregation constituted by his playing, and metamorphose this embodied presence into a music of unity and coherence” (211). He also points out that his music “achieves this unity through an invocation and reintegration of the past” (211).

²³ Coetzee notes that Ndebele writes ‘the clean, polished English of someone who is clearly not only at home in the language but has passed through an orthodox literary apprenticeship’ (36). It is not surprising that in texture and style his writing should contrast with that of other black writers who received their secondary education within South Africa - i.e. within the system of ‘Bantu Education’.

²⁴ The ‘Soweto novels’ are those in which the Soweto uprising of 1976 is the central or defining event. They are Tlali’s *Amandla* (1980), Sepamla’s *A Ride on the Whirlwind* (1981), Serote’s *To Every Birth its Blood* (1981), and Mzamane’s *The Children of Soweto* (1982). According to Mzamane, ‘the

cost (to this generation of children) of taking on the role of adults, assuming the responsibilities of political leadership, and in the process often acting in defiance of their usual mentors and role models (their parents and teachers). This is the terrain which Ndebele is almost uniquely qualified to explore; one is tempted to suggest that here is a novel that remains to be written.²⁵

Ndebele is clearly reacting against a literature which seemed to him to be built around what he calls “the surface symbols of South African reality” (“Turkish Tales” 23), and which often incorporated over-simple appeals to a collective (and unproblematic) “black” identity. While his work affirms the need for an awareness of history and a respect for (black) cultural traditions, it clearly questions the unreflexive affirmation of an undifferentiated “black” experience. Ndebele argues that after 1968, with the formation of the Black Consciousness organisations, black writing failed to “appropriate the new analytical sophistication of the BCM into its own handling of literary form” (“Redefining Relevance” 64). This kind of writing merely changed the emphasis – “from the moral evil of apartheid, to the existential and moral worth of blackness” (64). In criticising the superficial nature of this writing, with its refusal of “aesthetic and critical estrangement” (‘Turkish Tales’ 27) and its reduction of literature to politics (narrowly conceived), Ndebele is – among other things - trying to clear a space for the reception of his own work.²⁶ His stories are designed to do much more than simply “accumulate fact after fact of oppression and suffering” (“Turkish Tales” 27).²⁷ However, none of this diminishes the debt that can be traced in Ndebele’s own writing to the philosophy of Black Consciousness, and in particular to what he calls its “examination of the interior psychology of . . . oppression” (“Redefining Relevance” 64). Ndebele’s critical essays reveal his search for “ways of

community as a whole is the hero in these novels. Collective concerns triumph over purely personal aspirations’ (192).

²⁵ Ndebele in fact discusses exactly this issue in “Recovering Childhood: Children in South African National Construction”. I am indebted to Niel ten Kortenaar’s article, “Parents, Children and Fools” for alerting me to this chapter by Ndebele.

²⁶ Mackenzie makes the same point: “Although most of what he has to say about black South African fiction is astute and accurate, there is a sense in which he is also clearing ideological and ethical ground for his own style of storytelling” (“The Use of Orality” 350). He points out that *Fools* appeared a year before Ndebele’s seminal article, “Turkish Tales”, was published in *Staffrider*. It is significant that although one might not think of Ndebele as a “*Staffrider* writer”, he deliberately chose to publish this essay in *Staffrider*, as well as three of the stories from his collection (“The Prophetess”, “The Test” and “The Music of the Violin”). His Noma Award Acceptance Speech was also published in *Staffrider* (6.2 (1985): 39).

²⁷ Ndebele is referring to Matshoba’s *Call me not a Man*, a collection which, whatever its apparent shortcomings, is more interesting than Ndebele’s treatment of it would suggest.

thinking, ways of perception, that will help break down the closed epistemological structures of South African oppression” (“Redefining Relevance” 65):

The challenge is to free the entire social imagination of the oppressed from the laws of perception that have characterised apartheid society. For writers this meant freeing the creative process itself from those very laws. It means extending the writer’s perception of what can be written about, and the means and methods of writing.

(“Redefining Relevance” 65)

In this he is continuing the “inward-looking process” that Biko regarded as central to Black Consciousness (“We Blacks” 29).

Ndebele – through both his criticism and his practice as a writer - helped to unsettle what had become rather sterile and formulaic assumptions about black writing. At the same time he is clearly responding to the fraught conditions of South Africa in the 1980s²⁸ – a period characterised by Gordimer as “living in the interregnum”.²⁹

I live at 6,000 feet in a society whirling, stamping, swaying with the force of revolutionary change. The vision is heady, the image of the demonic dance - and accurate, not romantic: an image of actions springing from emotion, knocking deliberation aside. The city is Johannesburg, the country South Africa, and the time the last years of the colonial era in Africa. (*The Essential Gesture* 262)

It was Ndebele’s achievement to bring a cool head and an analytical mind to bear on the state of South African culture and letters in the midst of this highly charged political climate. His essays clearly anticipate Sachs’s call, in 1989, in an ANC in-house paper, for a temporary ban on the slogan, “Culture is a weapon of struggle”. Like Ndebele, he seeks to escape from the deadly apartheid binaries:

²⁸ His most direct response to the heightened repression that characterized the 1980s can be seen in “Death of a Son”. The story demonstrates Ndebele’s original approach to dealing in artistic terms with the violence that wracked the townships during this period: he makes the relationship between the husband and wife the focus of his story, and traces the impact of the husband’s determination to retrieve the body of his dead son, without the insult of having to pay a fee.

²⁹ Gordimer’s 1981 novel *July’s People*, which prefigures an apocalyptic future, is prefaced by a quotation from Gramsci: “The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms.”

Can we say that we have begun to grasp the full dimensions of the new country and the new people that is struggling to give birth to itself, or are we still trapped in the multiple ghettos of the apartheid imagination? (“Preparing Ourselves for Freedom” 19)

When he states that “our artists are not pushed to improve the quality of their work” and that “it is enough that it be politically correct”, and when he points to the absence of “ambiguity or contradiction”, he echoes some of Ndebele’s central concerns. A recurring term in Ndebele’s criticism is “irony” – and irony is (or may seem to be) incompatible with the demand for solidarity in the struggle: “The more fists and guns and spears, the better” (20).³⁰ Ndebele’s stories are themselves instances of a narrative art which permits irony, ambiguity, and contradiction.³¹

While Ndebele’s criticism may not explicitly address gender issues or draw attention to the patriarchal nature of dominant discourses (including that of Black Consciousness), an awareness of the gendered nature of identity is certainly present in his fiction, most obviously in his short story, “Death of a Son”.³² O’Brien addresses this issue and argues that Ndebele’s own call for a “rigorous, responsible, illuminating radical criticism” necessitates a rethinking of “gender-blind theory” (“Literature in Another South Africa” 76).³³ The sphere of the “ordinary” is also, he argues, the “private” sphere, and this is “traditionally coded female” (77). He suggests that, in shifting “the terrain of power from State and mine and battlefield to ‘day-to-day lives’ – the personal as political” (78), both Bessie Head and Ndebele are practising “a feminism (without the name)” (78). O’Brien draws attention to the congruence between Ndebele’s and Head’s fiction, and expresses surprise at the absence of any mention of Head’s work (particularly, perhaps, *The Collector of Treasures*) in Ndebele’s critical essays: “Head’s writings stand in an exemplary relation to Ndebele’s theory of black fiction . . . ; they should be brought together onstage to read each other’s scripts” (79). My own reading of Head’s work supports these observations, and her absence from this study is regretted. Her identification with her

³⁰ The concept of irony, and its role in Ndebele’s fiction, has been explored in two insightful articles by Morphet (“Cultural Imagination and Cultural Settlement”), and by Geertsema (“Ndebele, Fanon, Agency and Irony”).

³¹ The story which most lends itself to discussion in these terms is the title story, “Fools” with its disgraced anti-hero, the teacher Zamani, and his doppelganger, the young, militant student, Zani. Considerations of space unfortunately preclude an adequate discussion.

³² This could, in fact, be seen as a feminist story.

³³ O’Brien is quoting from Ndebele’s article, “The Ethics of Intellectual Combat”.

adopted country (Botswana), the fact that most of her work is written from exile, as well as the subject matter of her short stories (they are set in a rural village in Botswana), all help to explain her exclusion from this (already over-burdened) study.

JOEL MATLOU: A LIFE LESS ORDINARY?

This discussion of post-1976 black South African writing does not attempt to be comprehensive, but it would be incomplete without some reference to the short stories of Joel Matlou. Three of his stories were published in *Staffrider* (in 1979, 1980 and 1987), and a collection entitled *Life at Home and Other Stories* was published (by COSAW) in 1991. His stories gained salience partly because they were unlike anything else that anyone in South Africa was writing, and partly because of their endorsement by Ndebele in his seminal “Turkish Tales” essay, first published in *Staffrider* in 1984. Matlou’s “Man Against Himself” is one of the three stories he discusses as examples of what he calls “the rediscovery of the ordinary” (55): “These three stories remind us that the ordinary daily lives of people should be the direct focus of political interest because they constitute the *very content* of the struggle, for the struggle involves people, not abstractions” (55).

Matlou’s stories do seem to deal – in terms of subject matter - with “ordinary” events or experiences. The stories appear to be autobiographical (the protagonist is “Joel Matlou”, otherwise known as “Medupe”). “Farm Boy” tells of his early childhood on a farm. His father drives a tractor and feeds the farm animals; his mother is a “kitchen girl” (12); as a young boy he used to wet his bed; he sometimes accompanies his mother to the shop to buy provisions; he has a friend, a young white boy named John Dick (the son of the Oubaas). One Saturday in June 1962 he is invited to sleep over with his friend John. During the night an old black woman known as Mogwapa enters the room and hammers a needle into the top of the sleeping boy’s head. She is a “Moloi” and “walks” at night. The next morning his mother summons the Oubaas; the insensible boy is taken to the hospital where the needle is removed, and he recovers. Religious services are held on Sundays under a tree on the farm. “Medupe” learns to sing hymns – including a version of what has become the national anthem. At the end of the story his family plan to leave the farm because they want their son to attend school.

These may seem to be ordinary or unremarkable experiences (particularly if one accepts the practice of witchcraft). What is extraordinary is the manner of their narration: the stories are told in a straightforward, dead-pan manner by an apparently naïve or artless narrator who simply places on record a sequence of events which appear to be autobiographical. The narrator seems to have a limited formal education and uses a style that sometimes departs from standard usage. However, these linguistic variations are often very expressive. Here are some examples, selected at random from different stories;

My name of Medupe never died. (21)

It was a hard work to unsuccess. (25)

The day of the escaped convicts opened. (35)

If you respect [your parents] you are a stupid. If you don't respect, you are a clever. (45)

These variations on standard usage are often apt, and capture something of the narrator's original or untutored mode of apprehension. This is a style of writing that also seems politically naïve or ignorant – it seems untouched by the discourses of either liberalism or (black) nationalism, for example. The simple, apparently artless narrative style is enhanced by the near absence of explanation or authorial comment: we are in general limited to the perspective of the protagonist (a young boy or young man) and share his perceptions of the world. The narrator does sometimes make simple value judgements. For example: “Farm life is better than living in the location. Farm life is 100% safe” (“Farm Boy” 14). This implies some knowledge of the world (comparison would otherwise be impossible) and opens up a gap between the naïve experiencing self and the more experienced narrating self. Clearly the narrator is no longer a simple “farm-boy” (11).

This narrative reverses familiar perspectives. One recalls Ndebele's remark that the city “appears to have taken a tyrannical hold on the imagination of the average African writer” (“Turkish Tales” 21). Matshoba speaks of his attachment to

his “polluted rat-race city background”; he finds the country is “too dull and therefore mentally unhealthy” (“Three Days” 151). In contrast, Matlou’s childhood on the farm sounds almost idyllic: “My real play was to climb trees, make wire cars, chase the small pigs and throw apples all over the trees. Also, I used to play with water by opening the taps” (16).

The second story in the collection (“Life at Home”) immediately contradicts these initial impressions. The key term, slavery, is introduced in the opening sentence: “There where we were, we could really feel what the life of a slave was like” (23). The narrative perspective is quite different: the third-person narrator remains objective and detached, and accumulates evidence for the central assertion – that “Mr Matlou and his family were slaves” (27). This is the same family and the same farm, but the family are observed externally: we are given what seems to be objective information about the family members, their position and their work on the farm. “Joel” or “Medupe” – the narrator/protagonist of “Farm Boy” - is only mentioned midway through the story when the narrator lists the family members. We discover that he is the third child in the family (there was no mention of siblings in “Farm Boy”).

As a result, we are forced to revise our initial impression that Matlou is a naïve or artless storyteller who is innocent of any design on his reader. We discover that the child’s perspective (in “Farm Boy”) was in some important respects defective or misleading: “Joel” or “Medupe” did not understand that he and his family (and the other farm workers) were all “slaves”. This equation of the life of a farm worker with slavery may seem to contradict Ndebele’s assertion that “there is a seeming lack of direct political consciousness on the part of Matlou’s character” (53). Kirkwood states that when Matlou’s stories first began to appear in *Staffrider*, “many of its readers were challenged, ironically enough, by the sheer absence of an overt political standpoint” (9).³⁴ In Matlou’s stories political consciousness is not expressed in ways that have become routine, familiar or predictable. There is no recourse to the discourse of political struggle, and no attempt to place the exploitation of farm labour in a wider historical, political or socio-economic context. Matshoba’s story, “A Glimpse of Slavery”, provides an obvious contrast: here we have the familiar situation

³⁴ Kirkwood nevertheless argues that Matlou’s stories “are framed implicitly in the epic social reality of apartheid, and, more widely, the desolation of rural Africa . . .” (9).

of a sadistic, ogre-like farm owner who enforces his rule by sjambokking the new arrivals; there is a sadistic black overseer, “Bobbejaan”, and an obviously victimised, malnourished group of farm workers who seem resigned to their condition. Matlou’s narrator, on the other hand, gives an elementary, stripped-down definition of slavery – and one that has a universal application: “Bought and sold like a piece of furniture, having no say where he went, whom he belonged to or what kind of life he led” (23). Far from being an “ogre”, Matlou’s farmer seems quite benevolent: he builds houses, feeds his staff, transports their children to school and hospital, and guards them at night: “The farmer thought he was a good farmer, and not like other farmers. But in fact, his people were slaves and suffering” (24). This provokes reflection of the part of the reader: one can be well looked after, and still be a slave!³⁵ For Mr Matlou and his family, farm life was, we are told, “a hard road to unsuccess” (25). This story flatly contradicts the assertion of the narrator in the first story, that “farm life is better than town life” (17). If the family is to have a future, if the children are to gain an education, they must leave the farm. They apply for reference books, obtain a house in a nearby township, and relocate one Sunday - without telling “Baas Dick”. The narrator introduces an element of drama and humour by comparing their “escape” to an unfolding television feature: “Now bandits are on the run. Detectives are watching on TV2” (35). In spite of the poverty of the township and its lack of amenities, it is a scene of busy activity: “Every house had its action” (38). “Mr Matlou” has successfully managed his family’s escape and is now the owner of a “new two-roomed township house” (40).

The effect of Matlou’s style of storytelling is to defamiliarise the all-too-familiar facts of oppression and exploitation by avoiding any recourse to the usual conventions of representation and storytelling. The result is a freshness and an originality that one cannot help but find engaging. It is impossible to determine to what extent these effects are the product of conscious design on the part of the author. Ndebele assumes that the “literary deficiencies” which are present in the stories which he discusses by Matlou, Maseko and Siluma are a function of “the intellectually stultifying effects of apartheid and Bantu education” (“Turkish Tales” 56). If this is the case, there are undoubtedly gains as well as losses. Matlou’s originality, and the

³⁵ The farm owner is himself unaware that “his favourite staff driver was a slave” (25).

capacity of his stories to interest and surprise, needs to be recognised rather than explained away.

In the course of his discussion, Ndebele refers to a study of Basotho migrant workers conducted by the Oral History Project at the National University of Lesotho. He refers to “a particularly interesting informant” named Rantoa:

His has been a life of jail, escape, fights, securing lawyers for the best defence, and a variety of jobs. Rantoa, comment the authors, “is a man who has consciously developed a philosophy, a set of ideas, drawn from his own experience and which integrates his life and his understandings of it. . . . His philosophy is not an abstract one, but emerges from concrete situations.” (“Turkish Tales” 52)

One might apply this to Matlou, whose observations are all the more striking for not having been conditioned (or so it would seem) by either a formal education or by a life lived within the confines of the apartheid township. He is able to access a subject matter and employ perspectives which have almost no precedent in Black South African writing in English. This may owe something to a childhood exposure to oral storytelling of the kind described in “Farm Boy”: “There were men, women and children on the farm. We were in different languages, like Tsonga, Tswana, Pedi, Venda etc. We used to sit at the fire after the evening meal to make stories, which we call ‘dinoolwane’” (21).

At times Matlou surprises us with a capacity for homespun philosophical speculation.

I walked out of the main gate [of the mine] towards the bush to free myself. That time life was not endless but everlasting. The earth was once supposed to be flat. Well, so it is, from Hlatini [where he is] to Northam [where he is going]. That fact does not prevent science from proving that the earth as a whole is spherical. We are still at the stage that life itself is flat – the distance from birth to death. Yet the probability is that life, too, is spherical and much more extensive and capacious than the universe we know. (“Man Against Himself” 70)

The suggestion is that life is stranger than or different from what we conceive it to be. The stories seem to be the product of a man who has thought hard about life, who has known suffering, but who has not lost his capacity for wonder. Perhaps this is what

Kirkwood is getting at in his “Introduction”, when he refers to “the principle of hope” in Matlou’s stories:

That “every day is a time for a wise man” is to this extent the central proposition in Matlou’s view of the world, which is adapted to the celebration of small, unlooked-for victories rather than the Victory which is Certain. He invokes journeys of impossible duration, spaces as boundless as that menacing place he calls “South East”, harrowing riddles of identity; and against them he pits moments of rest or arrival, the security of familiar places, the self-discoveries that make up a “lifestyle” undreamt of in consumer magazines. (9)

Ndebele attempts to “naturalise” Matlou’s stories by discussing them as examples of the “ordinary” (as opposed to the “spectacular”). However, Matlou’s stories are quite unlike Ndebele’s own stories – a point also made by Morphet: “they are the antithesis of the stories in *Fools*. . . . They figure the experience of a black person entirely from within. They betray no sense that they will be read by anyone – anyone at all” (“Ordinary – Modern - Post-Modern” 140). They do not seem to be the products of an author who is conscious of a written literary tradition, and do not fit into any of the familiar modes of black South African writing. This may help to explain why his stories resist explanation or definition, and retain their capacity to interest and to challenge:

ZOË WICOMB

Wicomb’s writing is important for a variety of reasons, and it is fitting to conclude this study of black South African writing with her collection of short stories, *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987). Its inclusion may seem anomalous, given that this study has – with the possible exception of Ndebele’s stories³⁶ – only looked at work produced from within South Africa. The inclusion of Wicomb’s and Ndebele’s work points to the difficulty of making a clear distinction between work produced in exile and that produced from within. In the early 70s and mid-80s Ndebele was based at the University of Lesotho, a mountainous territory entirely surrounded by South Africa, but in close enough proximity to South Africa for this to resemble a

³⁶ It is often forgotten that his stories seem to have been written while he was outside the country; he was awarded a doctorate for these stories by the University of Denver in 1983.

kind of internal exile.³⁷ Wicomb, on the other hand, writes her stories from exile in Britain (although she returned to South Africa for some years in the early 90s to take up teaching posts at the Universities of Cape Town and the Western Cape). In both cases, their stories are located in South Africa, and both produce collections of stories that are coming-of-age narratives. In Wicomb's case, writing these stories is (in part at least) an attempt to overcome the alienation and loneliness of exile. In her interview with Hunter, Wicomb discusses her inability – or perhaps refusal – to write about her experience of living in England (and, latterly, Scotland): on the one hand she is an “outsider” to the culture she was born into; on the other hand, “since the book came out of intense homesickness, I couldn't write about Britain” (“Interview 87). Her stories are in fact rooted in her experience of growing up, first in a remote Griqua settlement near Vredendal (on the west coast of South Africa) and then (as a student) in Cape Town. Her protagonist, Frieda Shenton, spends years in exile in England, but this experience is a significant absence in the text. Unlike Mphahlele or Head or Nortjie (to cite three obvious antecedents), Wicomb does not make the condition of exile the explicit subject matter of her writing (although it clearly informs her writing, as it does that of Ndebele).³⁸

Wicomb's work is significant for a number of reasons. While she acknowledges the influence of other South African writers (most immediately, Head and Nortjie) her work is written – as Driver points out – from a space that has not been explored previously in South African fiction (“Transformation through Art” 50).³⁹ While Wicomb (for obvious reasons) resists being defined as “coloured”,⁴⁰ she seems to accept that she will “necessarily be placed as a ‘coloured writer’” and so will be

³⁷ Ndebele comments on this proximity in his interview with Lindfors, and describes the visit of Medupe to his university campus in Lesotho. He also refers to hearing Madingoane reciting “Africa My Beginning” (Interview with Lindfors 231).

³⁸ In his interview with Oliphant, Ndebele says the following: “I think that what the overseas experience afforded me, apart from reading and research opportunities, was a necessary distancing from South Africa. This, paradoxically, served as a means of recall, of retaining a kind of distilled memory. I found that being removed from some experiences at home served to recall those very experiences in a very vivid and compelling manner” (342). Exile seems to have affected Wicomb's writing in a similar way.

³⁹ Tlali is also, of course, a black woman writer, is also strongly influenced by Black Consciousness, and also foregrounds the experience of black women – but she writes out of a more familiar urban experience (Sophiatown, Soweto), and her closeness to an indigenous culture and language means that her work differs in some important respects from Wicomb's.

⁴⁰ The reasons for this refusal have already been discussed in relation to Rive and the District Six writers and need not be repeated. Wicomb has herself provided an analysis of the problems associated with “coloured identity” (“Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa”, in *Writing South Africa*).

read “in relation to Abrahams, la Guma, Rive and Head” (Meyer and Olver, “Interview” 187). This reception is not, of course, based simply on skin colour, or on the racial categories of apartheid, but it does recognise the marginalised position of those designated “coloured” in the South African body politic – a positioning that helps to explain the obsession with racial signifiers and the temptation to “pass” for white.⁴¹ Wicomb identifies the concerns which she and these earlier writers share as “identity, subjectivity, the problem of writing itself, born out of our common social and political conditions” (Meyer and Olver “Interview” 188). To this extent, despite her spatial and temporal distance from these earlier “coloured” writers, Wicomb continues to mine the same terrain and explore related issues – but with a difference. This difference arises partly from the fact that she is writing from exile, and partly from the fact that she identifies herself as a “black” woman and a feminist.⁴² She also brings to her writing the awareness and a self-reflexivity of a professional academic: she is herself a participant in the debates that have helped to change in quite radical ways the teaching of “English” in the last twenty or thirty years in this country and elsewhere.

It would be a mistake, however, to simply read Wicomb’s work as part of a narrowly defined literary tradition, since it clearly has much in common with wider traditions of South African writing. Like Ndebele (and many other writers), she draws on her own life experience: “I’ve drawn extensively on my own experience, the people and the landscape with which I’m familiar and love” (Hunter, “Interview” 93).⁴³ At the same time, she rejects the tendency to read fiction by black women as almost necessarily autobiographical: (“almost as if we’re incapable of artifice, incapable of fictionalising (93)).⁴⁴ Her insistence on fictionality echoes Ndebele’s response to similar questions about his stories, which also draw quite directly on his own life experience.⁴⁵ In Wicomb’s case, readers or critics in search of “authentic” experience may take encouragement from the fact that the same focal character – Frieda Shenton – recurs in most of the stories. The stories can thus be read as

⁴¹ This is, of course, the subject of Wicomb’s most recent novel, *Playing in the Light* (2006).

⁴² “Like everyone else, I write from a political position – as, amongst other things, a black South African and a feminist” (“An Author’s Agenda” 14).

⁴³ The autobiography is the other dominant genre of black writing.

⁴⁴ She admits, nevertheless, that she “flirted with autobiography” (Meyer and Olver, “Interview” 185).

⁴⁵ “The truth, however, is that mastery over one’s craft enables one to return to social and political issues with far greater freedom, understanding, insight and comprehensiveness” (Oliphant, “Interview” 343).

constituting a fragmentary bildungsroman, and as they are written in the first person the naïve reader may assume some sort of correspondence between Frieda's experience and that of the author.⁴⁶ This kind of reading is given further licence when Frieda turns out to be the author of a collection of stories which represent members of her family (often in ways that they seem to resent), and when one of the stories foregrounds the fiction-making process ("A Fair Exchange"). Rather than providing evidence for a quasi-autobiographical reading, however, these features should be seen as instances of metafictional reflexivity (something rather new in black South African writing). While Wicomb claims (in her interview with Hunter) that she is "stuck" with "the realist form" ("I'm not innovative") (92), her work does in fact transgress or play with the conventions of realism, and is more innovative than she seems willing to admit – at least in this particular interview. Her most flagrant violation of realist norms is, of course, the re-appearance or resurrection of Frieda's mother in the final story, which re-unites mother and daughter. It is impossible then, to read the stories literally, or as thinly disguised autobiographical fictions: in various ways, they insist on their artifice or fictionality. Her stories mark the entry of modernist or postmodernist experimentation into the black South African short story, although even here there are possible antecedents. Driver traces this aspect of Wicomb's work back to Bessie Head, and argues that Wicomb's stories "echo [*Maru*] in their invitation to the reader to pay attention to acts of representation as creative and constitutive, rather than as mimetic and documentary" ("Transformation through Art" 47). Wicomb herself names the "writing strategies" which postmodernism and postcolonialism have in common - "intertextuality, self-reflexivity, irony, to name a few" - all of which are present in her work (Meyer and Olver 196).

Wicomb's collection, then, both encourages and resists attempts to read it as fictional autobiography or fragmentary bildungsroman; it echoes certain trends in black South African fiction, while at the same time it marks a point of departure. Her stories have not usually been read in relation to Ndebele's *Fools and Other Stories*, but there is some basis for comparison. Both collections explore interiority and identity, and focus on the problematic or conflicted identity of the protagonist. Both writers insist on the status of their work as fiction. Wicomb shares with Ndebele an

⁴⁶ I discuss this aspect of Wicomb's stories in an article published in *Ariel* in 1996: "Exile and Homecoming: Identity in Zoë Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*".

indebtedness to Black Consciousness - although, like Ndebele, she avoids any simplistic affirmation of a homogenous black identity.⁴⁷ Both writers produce coming-of-age narratives (although, in Ndebele's case, the same character does not recur), and both collections examine the way in which class, race and gender intersect to complicate the formation of a unified, coherent identity. While Wicomb writes from an avowedly (black) feminist position, Ndebele's stories also demonstrate a sensitivity to issues of gender and identity. Both writers can be seen as "post-protest" writers, and Wicomb echoes Ndebele's critique of black writing when she asks: "What's the point of reflecting the world; it simply leads to the tautologies of struggle-writing in which the writer rehearsed the already-known evils of apartheid" (Meyer and Olver, "Interview" 196). In neither case is their work overtly polemical or political – yet both explore the impact of "politics" at an intimate, personal and familial level.

There is a further respect in which Wicomb's stories reflect a trend in South African short fiction: like Bosman's Marico stories, or Mphahlele's "Lesane" stories, or Essop's stories set in Fordsburg/Pageview, or Ronnie Govender's Cato Manor stories, or Mzamane's "Mzala" stories, or Head's *The Collector of Treasures*, or Ndebele's *Fools and Other Stories*, they exhibit certain features of the short story cycle. The stories of these writers are not only linked thematically, but also explore the dynamics of a particular community or cultural milieu, demonstrate a particular attachment to place,⁴⁸ and often trace the development of a particular character or characters. A story suffers if read in isolation, and gains in suggestiveness and complexity when read in the context of the collection as a whole. Sue Marais has commented on what she sees as a distinctive feature of the South African short story cycle. Instead of affirming community or shared identity, it questions or subverts such expectations: "It is a sense of failed or unrealised community and of disconnected relations and displaced selfhood . . . that has found persistent and cogent expression in local versions of the cycle genre" ("Getting Lost in Cape Town" 31).

The epigraph from Nortje's poem "Waiting" suggests that a quest for origins and/or identity is central to Wicomb's collection: "Origins trouble the voyager much,

⁴⁷ "I don't imagine I would ever have been able to speak and write if there hadn't been black consciousness, if there hadn't been feminism" (Hunter, Interview 88).

those roots/ that have sipped the waters of another continent” The sequence of stories reveals the way in which colour, class and gender combine to complicate any attempt on Frieda’s part to construct a coherent identity or to find a measure of autonomy for herself. Her alienation and estrangement from both her own family and from the wider society lead her to opt for exile; she is, however, ineluctably drawn back to South Africa, and in the end re-establishes a tentative reconnection with her family and her native land. The recurrence of the same character in this sequence of stories gives *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town* some of the coherence of the short story cycle. However, the gaps and spaces between the stories also suggest a modernist resistance to completeness and closure.⁴⁹

The stories register very vividly, through Frieda’s developing consciousness, the extent to which the lives of all South Africans (here particularly those classified as “coloured”) are shaped by apartheid. Sarah Gertude Millin’s novel, *God’s Stepchildren* (1924) is a significant counter-text for Wicomb: in Millin’s work, “coloured” people are seen in terms of the racial ideology of the time, and bear a stigma from which there is, apparently, no escape.⁵⁰ Wicomb’s protagonist, however, resists her ascribed status as “coloured,” and seeks to define herself on one’s own terms.

In the opening story, “Bowl like Hole”, Frieda’s parents attempt to escape the stigma of colour by defining themselves as “English-speaking”, acknowledging only their white ancestors, and asserting a superiority based on class. In particular, they define themselves in opposition to the Afrikaans-speaking, working-class Dirkses: Frieda is forbidden to play with their children, who are allegedly infested with lice. Mr Weedon, the visiting Englishman who owns or has an interest in the nearby gypsum mine, embodies all the attributes that Frieda’s parents seek to emulate -

⁴⁸ Wicomb often echoes Mphahlele’s phrase, “the tyranny of place” to describe the hold that her particular, remote, west-coast locale (“Little Namaqualand”) exercises over her imagination. She refers to this in her interview with Hunter (87) and in her interview with Meyer and Olver (182).

⁴⁹ Joyce’s *Dubliners* is often cited as a possible modernist precedent. Although there may be no conscious influence, Hemingway’s *In Our Time* and *Men Without Women* are also suggestive precedents – particularly since the sequence of Nick Adams stories also constitute a fragmentary novel of education. Wicomb’s novel, *David’s Story*, is a much more fractured narrative whose fragments, as she says, “resist coherence” (Meyer and Olver, “Interview” 186).

⁵⁰ Wicomb deals explicitly with these issues in her article “Shame and Identity: the Case of the Coloured in South Africa.” She points out that “the shame-bearing coloured finds her literary origins in Sarah Gertrude Millin’s eugenicist novel *God’s Step-children*” (100). Wicomb’s short story, “Another Story” (1990) is an instance of the postcolonial strategy of “writing back”, and Millin’s novel functions as an intertext.

gentility, decorum and civility. He is ““a gentleman, a true Englishman”” (2). By identifying with “Englishness”, the Shentons also define themselves in opposition to the “Boers”, who are seen as uncouth, ungentlemanly, uncivilised. This opening story, then, presents the terms on which Frieda’s identity is premised. If she is to achieve an understanding of the real relations of power and subordination in the world around her, she will have to reject reject the role for which she is being prepared, as Mr Shenton’s clever, educated, English-speaking daughter.

Race clearly functions as the crucial determinant of identity, status, power and opportunity in the society into which Frieda is born. By aspiring to Englishness, and by implication whiteness, the Shentons distance themselves from both the “uncouth” Boers and from their own Griqua⁵¹ or Khoikhoi forebears – the original inhabitants of that part of the world. This is, however, an identity which they cannot entirely escape, since it is inscribed on their bodies – hence their sensitivity to such physical features as skin tone, high cheekbones, and hair texture. The mother chastises her daughter for hiding under the table “like a tame Griqua” (9); Frieda’s father tells her: ““You don’t want cheekbones that jut out like a Hottentot’s”” (24). (Her father also refers to a dark-skinned admirer as “almost pure kaffir” (116).) The stories demonstrate the extent to which the Shentons (and by extension other members of their community) have assimilated and internalised the racism that is endemic to South African society. Their desperate expedient is to define themselves as ““respectable Coloureds”” (116)

The father’s decision to send his daughter to a private school in Cape Town (formerly reserved for whites) launches her on an ambiguous path which confers on her the advantages of a privileged education and life-style. At the same time, however, her racial classification limits her freedom of choice and association.⁵² The difficulty of her situation is thrown into sharp relief by the act of abortion which is the pivot of the title story: Frieda aborts not only the foetus that she is carrying, but also

⁵¹ The term “Griqua” is derived from the Khoi name “Guriqua”. The Griquas were a mixed group, the product of extensive interaction over a long period on the northern Cape border between the Khoikhoi, freed or runaway slaves, and the *trekboers*. Until the early 19th century they referred to themselves as “Bastaards” (people of mixed descent). They came to speak a Griqua-inflected Afrikaans.

⁵² “When the Train Comes” is, apart from anything else, a vivid demonstration of the power of patriarchy. The father exerts his control over his daughter through a mixture of concern, bribery and coercion. A key element of his regime is his supervision of what Frieda eats. By turning her into a girl who is “fat” (and therefore unattractive), he increases her dependence on him. His ability to control his daughter is enhanced by the absence of the mother, whose death is referred to in the story. Clearly, Frieda will have to disappoint or reject her father if she is to achieve selfhood and some kind of autonomy.

any possibility of a continuing relationship with her white, university-educated lover, Michael.⁵³ The story also demonstrates (the title is ironic) how very “lost” Frieda feels in Cape Town, supposedly the mother city, with its familiar landmarks. Alone and afraid, at one point she “longs for the veld of [her] childhood” (73).

The following story, “Home Sweet Home”,⁵⁴ is perhaps the pivotal story in the collection, in that it demonstrates that a return to her rural home is hardly a viable alternative for Frieda. Her privileged English education has alienated her from those closest to her, her parents and extended family (ironically, the very people who had identified education as a means of escape from oppression and servitude). The story reveals Frieda’s acute discomfort in the presence of her family. They cannot understand why she - “an educated person” - does not feel at home in Cape Town, and ascribe her decision to emigrate to England (rather than Canada) to her “stubbornness.” Their insistence on respectability and their veneration of things English is their way of dissociating themselves from the stigma associated with colour. The dominant figure here is Aunt Cissie, with her apparently endless stock of clichés and maxims, and her incessant recycling of familiar gender stereotypes: “ ‘A lady must never be seen without her handbag’ ” (83); “ ‘Behave yourself at all times like a lady, and remember honesty is always the best policy’ ” (87); “ ‘Nice girls don’t do slovenly needlework’ ” (109). Frieda finds it almost impossible to speak to “those who claim [her] as their own” (94). At one point she escapes and makes her way to the nearby riverbed, hoping to recover, if only momentarily, her sense of herself as a child, when, “young and genderless,” she was free to roam the riverbanks alone, “belonging without question to this country, this world” (183). Frieda longs for a kind of prelapsarian innocence, a sense of her place in the world as simply “given”. The stories, however, reveal that self-awareness necessarily entails a sense of one’s gendered, racialised and socialised identity. Exile seems the only option. The consequences of remaining are memorably imaged by the mule which she watches sinking into the quicksand of the dry river bed:

It balances on its hind legs like an ill-trained circus animal, the front raised, the belly flashing white as it staggers in a grotesque dance.

⁵³ The Immorality Act prohibited sexual relations across the colour bar, and the Mixed Marriages Act prohibited inter-racial or “mixed” marriages.

⁵⁴ The irony is obvious: home is anything but sweet. The title is one of the platitudes that Aunt Cissie is prone to come out with.

When the hind legs plummet deep into the sand, the front drops in search of equilibrium. Then, holding its head high, the animal remains quite still as it sinks. (103)

Staying on and accepting the embrace of family would mean slow suffocation. The green pastures of England (“a landscape anybody could love” (90)) beckon. This is, of course, a landscape that she has encountered imaginatively, within the pages of the novels she has studied at the University of the Western Cape.

Frieda’s move – from colony or ex-colony to metropolis - replays a familiar pattern: exile is almost the norm for the modernist or postcolonial writer. As Gurr points out (he has the example of Joyce in mind): “In every case the flight into exile is followed by the painstaking reconstruction of home in fiction, in near-autobiographic terms, and with an identically detached, dispassionate artistic posture” (17). *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town* was written during the twenty or so years that Wicomb spent in exile; and she speaks of the “intense homesickness” out of which the book was written (Interview with Hunter 87). The stories explore the pressures that send Frieda into exile, but they also trace the impulse which leads Frieda back to South Africa, to her mother and her motherland.

In “Behind the Bougainvillea,” we have a rare glimpse of Frieda, alone in her kitchen in the English winter, watching the raindrops gather overhead and drip into an enamel plate: “So much rain, and I’m in the wrong bloody hemisphere” (112). This story reveals the ambiguity and difficulty of returning home, and explores her conflicting feelings as she waits in the doctor’s courtyard. For her father, the people who wait outside are “hotnots” who do not know how to use “a nice clean water lavatory” (105); for Frieda, “sealed off from the eloquent world around her” (she does not understand their language) the otherness of these people is a source of fascination.

In the penultimate story, “Ash on my Sleeve,” Frieda visits her old university friend, Moira, now married with children and living in relative affluence in “a new Coloured suburb” in Cape Town. Again, ambiguity and a sense of unease are the keynote, as Frieda observes Moira’s domestic situation and the compromises she has had to make. In fact, Moira demonstrates considerable resilience and integrity: she employs a servant, but allows other blacks to reside (illegally) in her backyard; she has returned to work, and she insists on her right to attend meetings of her UDF-

affiliated cultural group. In many ways, she functions as a rather unsettling alter-ego for Frieda. At one point she articulates the ambivalent situation of the “coloured” in South Africa: “‘We’ve never wanted to be ourselves and that’s why we stray . . . across the continent, across the oceans and even here, right into the Tricameral parliament, playing right into [the Government’s] hands” (156). Then, looking Frieda in the eye, she declares, “‘Actually, it suits me very well to live here.’” She has, by implication, come to terms with who she is. Can the same be said for Frieda?

The final story, “A Trip to the Gifberge”, describes a second return visit. The story springs a major surprise: it is Frieda’s father who has died, and her mother who is alive. In this story, and in “A Fair Exchange”, Frieda is represented as herself a maker of fiction (and in some sense, therefore, as a surrogate for the author). In the final story, the mother (in the very story which “resurrects” her) reproaches her daughter for “invent[ing] [her] death” and “killing [her] over and over” (172). Moreover, she accuses her daughter of using the English language “like a catapult” against her, and describes her stories as “dreary little things in which nothing happens except . . . except . . .” (the word she cannot bring herself to speak is, presumably, “abortion” (171)). The stories offend her sense of propriety and decency, and in disowning them she is, in effect, disowning her daughter. As Marais points out, this “metafictional re-evaluation foregrounds the discursive character of the stories as a whole” (“Getting Lost in Cape Town” 38). The question that the mother raises, however, remains: “But you’ve used the real. If I can recognise people and places, so can others” (172). Wicomb’s stories are clearly grounded in particular social, political and regional realities, and their force derives in part from their realism. Perhaps the unkindest cut of all is the mother’s argument that by opting for exile Frieda has forfeited any claim to know or be able to represent the truth about her country of origin: “What do you know about things, about people, about this place where you were born? You left. Remember?” (172).

While the story questions the naïve assumption that there is a pre-existing “truth” that can be represented, for Frieda the journey with her mother up into the Gifberge is a journey of (re-)discovery and reconnection - with her mother and with her native land. As they ascend the mountains they enter into what seems “quite another world, a darker, greener world” (176), and the mother identifies and comments on the properties of particular plants and shrubs. Earlier, Frieda had

doubted that proteas (South Africa's national flower) would be found in the mountains. The mother is proved right, and asks Frieda to dig up a bush for her garden. Frieda's mocking response - "And then you can hoist the South African flag and sing 'Die Stem'" - provokes the following rejoinder:

"You who're so clever ought to know that proteas belong to the veld . . . A bush is a bush: it doesn't become what people think they inject into it. We know who lived in these mountains when the Europeans were still shivering in their own country. What they think of the veld and its flowers is of no interest to me."

(185)

The mother's reply undercuts her (supposedly more politically aware) daughter's rejection of the protea: she in effect reappropriates the protea, in the process affirming an identity and a relation to the land that predates colonialism. This is perhaps her most valuable gift to her more intellectually developed daughter. At the end of the story the lines of communication between mother and daughter at least have been opened, and the possibility of return is left open. As Wicomb herself puts it, "The silence of 'Home Sweet Home' is broken" (Hunter, 'Interview' 91).

How does one view this ending? According to Sicherman, "Frieda has finally become an autonomous being who knows her own identity as a modern Griqua understanding history and rejecting self-hate" ("The Narrator's Identity" 119). This seems over-simple: given Frieda's difficult and conflicted personal history, it is difficult to see this story as representing a final resolution of her predicament.⁵⁵ Wicomb suggests, in "Comment on Return to South Africa" (1994), that "home is an ambiguous site where you belong and feel comfortable, but where you encounter revulsion or horror" (575). In her interview with Hunter, she remarks, "perhaps it's a dream, wishing to belong" (87). She adds: "I discovered that deracination and hybridity . . . are conditions that are essentially me and must be accepted and embraced as such" ("Comment on Return" 575). One cannot, of course, simply

⁵⁵ The "Griqua" identity is in any case already a hybrid identity, forged through intermarriage and cultural contact on the northern Cape frontier. By the nineteenth century the Griquas spoke Afrikaans and were difficult to distinguish from the Boer frontiersmen and farmers. However, Frieda has at least come to accept her "bush" of Griqua hair (178) and achieved a measure of self-understanding.

transfer these remarks, which refer to the author, to her fictional character, Frieda, but they are at least suggestive.⁵⁶

This final story can be seen as Wicomb's attempt to write herself home. Gready's comment on the theme of exile and homecoming is applicable here: "The writer finds a home in writing about home, in characters who also seek a home or who can be written home in a kind of vicarious homecoming" ("Home and Homecoming" 510). He points out, however, that "homecoming is often an ambiguous and disorientating experience, with joy and relief tempered, even eclipsed, by other emotions such as disappointment and unfulfilled expectations, disillusionment and anger" (512). In this respect Wicomb's stories prefigure and anticipate the narratives of return that were to follow the unbanning of political parties, the release of Mandela and other leaders, and the negotiations leading to the country's first democratic election in 1994.

With Wicomb's work the terms "modernist" or "postmodernist" come into play for almost the first time in black South African writing.⁵⁷ Her fiction (and here I also have *David's Story* in mind) goes some way towards healing what Nkosi has referred to as "the unhealed split between white and black writing, between on the one side an urgent need to document and to bear witness, and on the other the capacity to go on furlough, to loiter, to experiment" ("Postmodernism and Black Writing in South Africa" 75). I doubt, however, that Wicomb would accept that she has been "going on furlough" or "loitering": her work reveals a sustained, intense and committed engagement with contemporary South Africa, a society in transition, but also a society that is haunted by its past. What all three writers considered in this chapter have in common is a willingness to push beyond forms of representation sanctioned by the struggle against apartheid, or by what Attridge and Jolly refer to as "the institutionalised culture of resistance" (2). They point forward to the emergence of what Pechey has called "a post-heroic culture of irony, the local, the ordinary" ("The Post-apartheid Sublime" 57). Their work is characterised by an "inward turn" – by a willingness to explore subjectivity – and this sets in motion a search for fictional

⁵⁶ There are moments in her interview with Hunter where Wicomb comes close to identifying her experience with Frieda's: "In the latter half of the book my heroine is in Britain, but I refuse to comment on it because my experience there was about being silent. I was certainly not going to give my heroine any voice in Britain" (87).

⁵⁷ I am picking up here on a question raised by Attridge and Jolly in their "Introduction" to *Writing South Africa* (1).

forms that go beyond mimetic realism. In their work these writers anticipate and explore some of the imaginative challenges that lie ahead in the post-apartheid period.

CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSION

This project was prompted in part by dissatisfaction with the sometimes disparaging comments made about black writing in South Africa – often by black writers and critics themselves. The best known of these is Nkosi’s verdict on the writing of the 1950s: “With the best will in the world it is impossible to detect in the fiction of black South Africans any significant or complex talent which responds with both sufficient vigour of the imagination and sufficient technical resources, to the problems posed by conditions in South Africa” (*Home and Exile* 130). More recently Nkosi has commented on what he calls the “colonial status of black writing in South Africa”; he refers to “its formal insufficiencies, its disappointing breadline asceticism and prim disapproval of irony” (“Postmodernism and Black Writing in South Africa” 77).¹ This was a surprising situation: why should critics like Nkosi devalue a tradition of writing in which they were themselves deeply implicated? What assumptions (about literature and politics) informed their discussion of black writing? What (implicit or explicit) claims were they perhaps making for themselves – as critics or writers?

A central aim of this study is to provide a careful and attentive reading of writing by black South Africans, and to arrive at what is, one hopes, a more balanced assessment of their work. This entails giving due regard to the distinctive qualities of the work of particular writers, as well as to the more generic features of their writing. It also, of course, requires one to situate their work in its historical and cultural context. A focus on what Vaughan calls “the individual character” of particular works is not displaced by an interest in “the symptomatic production of themes and images”; rather, the two approaches are held in tension (“*Staffrider* and Directions within Contemporary South African Literature” 197). This necessitates an appreciation of both the “literary qualities” or “surface features” of particular stories, as well as an understanding of their contexts of production and reception. The *Drum* chapter shows the difficulty of generalising about the work of even this reasonably distinct group of writers, and points to the variation that exists even within the work of one writer (Can Themba). It becomes apparent that it is reductive or simplistic to view all (or almost

¹ He goes on to suggest that “the backwardness of black writing” can be traced to “its state of internal isolation and surveillance under the apartheid regime” and to “wounds inflicted by cultural deprivation and social neglect” (70).

all) black South African writing as a species of “protest writing”, or as caught up in the conventions of the “spectacular”, or as promoting the “unhistorical image” of a “passive people” (Ndebele, *Rediscovery* 158) or as addressed (implicitly) to a white audience. Does it advance our understanding of black South African writing to put Dhlomo, Abrahams, Sentso, Mphahlele, Themba, Modisane, Maimane, Hutchinson, Rive, Matthews, La Guma, Mzamane, Matshoba and Tlali (together, presumably, with writers like Dangor, Essop and Govender) in one box labelled “protest” or “spectacle”? Even within the “protest” mode of writing, it is surely necessary to differentiate between the different forms that this writing takes – from the more nuanced, implicit, indirect protest of the writers of the 1950s to the angry, outspoken, overtly didactic or polemical protest (if that is the right word) of the *Staffrider* generation.² In Matshoba’s work, the expository and conscientising function dominates to such an extent that the familiar distinction between fiction on the one hand and exposition, reporting or testimony on the other virtually disappears.³ Tlali is at least aware (when writing her first novel) that she is contravening what were then regarded as “literary” standards:

And then I also studied English [at the University of the Witwatersrand], and I knew that to write a book where you are busy preaching is not right. You know it’s not good literature. I knew all of that and I did not care. I did it deliberately, I preached with the very first chapter. . . . I was creating my own platform. It was deliberate.
(Jolly, Interview 144)

Black South African writing – particularly that associated with *Staffrider* - requires of one a willingness to reconsider the assumptions and expectations that one brings to the reading of prose fiction, as well as an understanding of the communicative function of this writing. Neither Tlali nor Matshoba are interested in constructing fictional narratives in the Western tradition, and it seems inappropriate to judge their work in terms of an aesthetic grounded in different conventions and conditions. Matshoba’s work does exhibit many of the features of “spectacular” writing, but before rushing to judgement one needs to take into account the circumstances in

² Sole argues that recent critics of South African literature, influenced by what has become a new orthodoxy (post-colonial criticism) tend to “stereotype the literary expression produced during the struggle period as a literature obsessed with politics and oblivious of the quotidian experience of its characters or its readers” (“South Africa Passes the Posts” 119). He also points to the reliance on “the authority of a handful of critics such as Ndebele, Sachs and Nkosi” (119).

³ One indication of this is the difficulty of distinguishing between author and narrator.

which he was writing and the audience for whom he was writing. The political climate of the time, and the urgency of the need to address the challenges facing black South Africans, cannot be ignored. The result is a mode of representation that paints a stark, polarised, black-and-white picture: white farmers are “ogres”, black police reservists are “hyenas” and “psychopaths” and township superintendents (“Beak Nose” and “Lion Face”) are “villains”. Ordinary black people, on the other hand, are innocent victims – like the hapless *goduka* in “Call me not a Man”, or the farm workers in “A Glimpse of Slavery”, or Vusi in “My Friend, the Outcast”. In a formulation that anticipates Ndebele’s later critique of black writing, Mphahlele states that what characterises this (post-1960s) writing is “a direct urgent confrontation with the dominant political morality. The dramatisation of the message is the major concern. The intention to *make* literature is either ignored or subdued” (“South African Literature vs. the Political Morality” 14). He cites Matshoba as an example of a writer who “wrench[es] the spiked cactus from the ground with bare hands, so to speak, in [his] attack on the system” (14). It would be idle to argue that Matshoba should not have done this, or to insist on separating his stories from their socio-political context, or to regard the politically charged circumstances in which he is writing as “extrinsic” to his writing. As Vaughan points out, “The very existence of *Staffrider* should make it clear that the problem of aesthetic value cannot be separated from social or political questions, questions which involve some understanding of who is doing the evaluating, and of the context in which the evaluative process is made significant” (“*Staffrider* and Directions within Contemporary South African Literature” 208). The context can in fact be seen as generating its own aesthetic: “The literature works this way: the more the brutality of the system is dramatised, the better; the more exploitation is revealed and starkly dramatised, the better. The more the hypocrisy of liberals is revealed, the better” (*Rediscovery* 45). Ndebele argues that “the aesthetic validity of this literature to its own readership lies precisely in the reader’s recognition of a familiar oppressive reality” (*Rediscovery* 45). In some of this writing there is little room for subtlety, indirection, implication, irony or the exploration of interiority: “Thinking is secondary to seeing. Subtlety is secondary to obviousness” (Ndebele 43). Readers schooled in the Western literary tradition (as Ndebele himself is) may find this mode of representation “jarring” (Ndebele 45) – but this should not prevent one from recognising its validity (in its own terms) or its efficacy or utility at the time. The “literature of combat” is designed to promote solidarity and action (rather than

reflection or contemplation): its *raison d'être* lies in its ability to lead its readers to identify with a cause (national liberation) and to resist oppression. It seems apposite to recall Fanon, whose work spoke directly to Biko and his generation: “Thus we see that the primary Manichaeism which governed colonial society is preserved intact during the period of colonisation; that is to say, the settler never ceases to be the enemy, the opponent, the foe that must be overthrown” (*The Wretched of the Earth* 39). The result is a mode of writing which seems incompatible with irony:

Irony is the literary manifestation of the principle of contradiction. Its fundamental law . . . is that everything involving human society is in a state of flux; that the dialectic between appearance and reality in the conduct of human affairs is always operative and constantly problematic, and that consequently, in the representation of human reality, nothing can be taken for granted.

(Ndebele, *Rediscovery* 67)

In a context of the liberation struggle, irony may be unhelpful: if writing promotes reflection, subverts stereotypes, and reveals the “enemy” as human after all, then this may well inhibit action. One must insist, however, that not all black writers – even those writing in the 70s and 80s – attack “the system” in this overt, confrontational way or seek simply to “conscientise” their readers.

Matshoba’s stories clearly reflect a seismic shift in South African political and cultural life – a shift from Sophiatown to Soweto, from *Drum* to *Staffrider*, from the liberation politics of the 1950s to the resistance politics of the 1970s and 1980s – a shift, in other words, from “protest” to “challenge”.⁴ Ndebele identifies the crucial historical marker as the establishment of the South African Students Organisation (SASO) and the Black Consciousness movement (BCM) in 1968 (*Rediscovery* 63). A central aim of this study has been to track these shifts and explore the appropriateness of the terms that have been used to define black writing during this period. Mzamane underlines the significance of the break with the politics of protest and the ideology of liberalism (a break which was largely engineered by the proponents of Black Consciousness). When he castigates Shava for his failure to distinguish between “protest” and “resistance” he echoes a central theme of this study: “Now more than ever it has become reductionist to categorise all African literature in South Africa as

⁴ These are the terms used by Karis and Gerhart, whose documentary history of black politics in South Africa is entitled *From Protest to Challenge*.

protest” (“Cultivating a People’s Voice” 60).⁵ His exasperation (he is writing in 1991) is understandable, and he does accurately identify and describe two modes of black writing, but in my view it is also over-simple (or reductionist) to regard all black writing as falling into one or the other of these camps.

Ndebele has produced what is probably the most influential account of black writing in this country, and any discussion of the work of these writers must enter into dialogue with him. Mphahlele’s critical comments – expressed in a range of essays, articles and books over a period of more than forty years – are more dispersed, but they record the growth of his self-understanding as a writer and as a critic of South African and African (and African diasporic) writing.⁶ His critical interventions over this extended period usually avoid the dismissive tone and the sometimes casual judgements of other critics. In an earlier article I argued that a distinctive feature of the “Lesane” stories was their consistent foregrounding of the communal aspects of ordinary people’s lives: his stories dealt with what Ndebele refers to as ‘the essential drama in the lives of ordinary people’” (“The Lesane Stories of Es’kia Mphahlele” (80)). Mphahlele states that the focus of his work has always been “the drama of life as lived in the ghetto” (*The African Image* 76). This study suggests that the qualities associated with category of “the ordinary” are in fact evident in the work of a number of other black South African writers, and that Mphahlele can be seen as the founding figure of this tradition of writing. The qualities which distinguish the “Lesane” stories from the more sensational writing published in *Drum* are also evident in Mphahlele’s more mature work, written from exile – in stories such as “In Corner B”, “Grieg on a Stolen Piano” and “Mrs Plum” in particular.⁷ Mrs Plum is a sustained exploration of interiority, written from the perspective of a black woman (a domestic worker), and anticipates in various ways Ndebele’s short stories written two decades later.

The title of Mphahlele’s collection– “The Unbroken Song” – suggests a continuing thread running through his own writing (and by extension through the work

⁵ He identifies the central feature of “protest” politics (and writing): “The end in view of protest action is reform, never revolution. Protest is a quest for accommodation, and not a struggle for empowerment” (“Cultivating a People’s Voice” 60). Harlow identifies “resistance writing” as writing that reflects the perspectives of the liberation movements in which it can be said to participate. She also points out that such writing “demands recognition of its independent status and existence as literary production” and “presents a serious challenge to the codes and canons of both the theory and the practice of literature and its criticism as these have developed in the west” (xvi).

⁶ Two recent publications; *Es’kia* (2002) and *Es’kia Continued* (2005) have collected many previously unpublished or little-known speeches, essays and articles.

⁷ These stories, originally published in *In Corner B* (1967), were republished in *The Unbroken Song* (1981).

of other black writers). One such thread is the assertion of the presence of black South Africans in the cities of “white” South Africa. Whether or not they were overtly protesting against an exploitative system, the *Drum* writers, by setting pen to paper and narrating the story of township life, were in effect resisting those forces which sought to silence or marginalise them – or to imprison them in “time capsules of traditional identity” (Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity* 116). In his retrospective essay, “Landmarks of Literary History in South Africa” (1980), Mphahlele sums up their achievement in this way:

The black writer was asserting his sense of permanence in an urban ghetto life where he was being told he was a mere migrant worker with no hope for security of tenure in his municipal boxhouse. The writers helped fashion a township culture and give it literary expression: the music and dance that had a distinctive flavour and beat, the rituals of birth and death and marriage and church activity, the pass laws, the violence, shebeen life

(“Landmarks” 7)

One recalls the defiant Sophiatown graffito, “Ons Pola Hier” (in itself a linguistic expression of resistance, couched in the language of the *tsotsi*). Sophiatown may have been demolished, but Soweto could not be wished away, and the uprising of 1976 could be said to represent the return of the repressed.⁸

Another thread or leitmotif running through much black writing is the affirmation of elements of traditional culture – an affirmation that is complicated by the need to resist the state’s attempts to impose particular ethnic identities on black South Africans.⁹ This becomes an explicit focus for the writers and activists of the black consciousness era, but an awareness of cultural continuities was always present as a kind of substratum in the consciousness of township dwellers. However much black writers were asserting an urban presence and identity, they were also aware of the pressure or the pull of their traditional culture (at times a constraint, at times a resource). The tension between tradition and modernity is captured by Mphahlele in

⁸ Ironically the township is also the site of dislocation, ambivalence and unease – “a place where one experiences one’s *dislocation* from rural life, economic independence, political representation and citizenship” (Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity* 176). Serote’s well-known poem “City Johannesburg” is a vivid instance of the ambivalence evoked by the township, on the one hand, and the modern city of which it is an appendage, on the other.

⁹ This element is largely absent from some of the writing of the 1950s; one thinks in particular of Themba, who even affected an ignorance of an indigenous language.

several of his writings, and the word that he uses to describe the condition of the modern African is “ambivalence” – long before it became a central term in the lexicon of postcolonial criticism. The word captures precisely that mixture of attraction and repulsion that is evident in the work of some of the *Drum* writers - and which Black Consciousness attempted to undo or reverse. In spite of a shift towards the affirmation of an “African” or “black” identity in the second edition of *The African Image*,¹⁰ an awareness of this underlying tension or ambiguity persists:

Ambivalence, ambivalence. Always having to maintain equilibrium. You walk with this double personality as a colonised man. You had to cope with the presence of foreign rule and its white minions. Now you have to cope with what they left on your mind. So you will always be a colonised man. . . . The dialogue between the two selves never ends. The pendulum swings between revulsion and attraction, between the dreams and the reality of a living past, and the aspirations, the imperatives of modern living.

(Mphahlele, *The African Image* 41)

An enduring feature of black South African writing is its exploration of the culture of the township – a culture that survives through adaptation, improvisation, appropriation and incorporation. This emergent urban culture may have been “a fugitive culture, borrowing here, incorporating there, retaining this, neglecting that” – but it was nevertheless “a virile culture” (Mphahlele, “Black and White” 346). From Mphahlele and Themba in the 1950s to Tlali and Matshoba in the 1970s and 1980s, this exploration of the dynamics of township life suggests affirmation rather than negation. It is related to what Mphahlele calls “the tyranny of place” and the particular style of writing that this generates:

A setting that generates so much pain as South Africa’s does claims all our physical and emotional responses. You hold onto it, document it, even though, or because, it riles you up. You feed on the poison it releases; it drains much out of you, but you love it for all that. . . . Your writing must stay at a high pitch of passionate intensity. The impressionistic style you employ is a way of measuring your anger and flexing the muscle of your identity. From this you evolve an aesthetic.
(“The Tyranny of Place and Aesthetics” 6)

¹⁰ Attwell examines this shift in his chapter on Mphahlele (“Fugitive Pieces”) in *Rewriting Modernity*.

This suggests the hold that the township exerts on the imagination and sensibility of the black South African writer: “He must simply come to terms with the tyranny of place or grapple with it” (8). From Mphahlele through to Ndebele, there is a body of work that grapples with the “tyranny of place” and with the drama of township life and that speaks of the ongoing struggle to survive and build some sort of communal life. Trump concludes that “the most common pattern in black short fiction . . . is a critical awareness on the writer’s part of battling, and often succeeding, to maintain family and community life in circumstances of enormous hardship” (“Black South African Short Fiction” 60).¹¹

Ndebele’s and Mzamane’s critique of black protest writing demonstrates the urgency of the psychological need – channelled by the Black Consciousness movement – to forge a compensatory image of the black man (and it was, invariably, a *man*) as active, proud, resourceful, conscious of his history and his culture, and ready to advance the struggle for liberation. However salutary Ndebele’s criticism may have been at the time, by lumping almost all black writing into one broad category (“spectacular” or “protest” writing) it (ironically) helped to promote a partial and somewhat reductive image of black writing in South Africa. According to Trump, “As one considers the works of leading black South African writers, one finds little in them that accords with [Ndebele’s] description of protest literature. . . . Black South African writing is as much about assertion and affirmation as it is a record of hardship” (59-60). Though his exploration of the representations of jazz in (mainly) black South African writing, Titlestad reveals these writers’ “complex and changing participation in the symbolic domain of the black Atlantic” (something which this study has only been able to glance at): “The texts we have considered suggest the need to recognise a mode and measure of inventiveness similar to that of the musical improviser, which persists even in the face of relentless surveillance and control” (241). He also points out that “panoptical surveillance” is never complete, and that “counter-currents are always available to those seeking to improvise temporary enclaves of difference and, hence, or relative autonomy” (242). These “counter-currents” are clearly present in much of the work that has been discussed in the present study.

¹¹ At the risk of labouring the point, one should note how well this description fits the short fiction of Mphahlele, from the early “Lesane” stories to the more mature work of *In Corner B*.

The danger inherent in Trump's view (and perhaps even in Titlestad's) is that (as Trump himself acknowledges) it can lead to an idealisation of township life (on the part of the critic, if not of the writer - most black writers do not view township life through rose-tinted glasses). One of the most overworked critical terms is "vibrant", invoked repeatedly to refer to the vitality or spontaneity that supposedly characterises township life. Latterly *ubuntu* has become a somewhat overworked term – used to refer to the mutual recognition of each person's humanity that (allegedly) characterises township life.¹² Clearly violence, insecurity, fear and deprivation are equally part of black urban life, and this is woven into the fabric of township narratives, whether autobiographical or fictional.¹³

Mphahlele has also advanced the most influential explanation for the preference of so many black South African writers for the short story form:

The literary style of the fifties was racy, agitated, impressionistic, it quivered with a nervous energy, a caustic wit. Impressionistic, because our writers feel life at the basic levels of sheer survival, because blacks are so close to physical pain The writer attempted all the time to record minute-by-minute experience, unlike his counterpart in the former French and British colonies.

(“Landmarks of Literary History” 7)

It is impossible for a writer who lives in oppression to organise his whole personality into creating a novel. The short story is used as a short-cut to prose meaning and one gets some things off one's chest in quick time.

(“Black and White” 342).

¹² In an article in the *Journal of Literary Studies* I examine the extent to which the values associated with *ubuntu* are represented in the work of black South African writers, beginning with Mphahlele, who describes himself as an “African humanist” (“Welcome to the World of our Humanity’: (African) Humanism, *Ubuntu* and Black South African Writing” 265 – 282).

¹³ One instance of this would be the indelible impression left on the young Mphahlele by his father's violent assault on his mother: “The strong smell of burning gas from a stove often reminds me of that day” (*Down Second Avenue* 28). The autobiographies of black South African writers are replete with such instances.

This view has been echoed by subsequent writers and critics.¹⁴ It has been repeated so often by so many different writers that it must have some validity - but it ignores the crucial fact that *Drum* (and subsequently *Staffrider*) provided the vehicle for the publication of short stories by black writers. Without these (and other) publication outlets, a short story tradition could hardly have developed in South Africa. One can hardly underestimate *Drum's* importance in popularising the short story form and stimulating aspirant writers throughout Africa to follow in the footsteps of its prize-winning authors. It was, for example, the success of "Mob Passion" (*Drum* April 1953) which launched Can Themba's career as a writer. Lindfors points out that in its peak year (1957) *Drum's* short story competition attracted entries from no fewer than 1,638 contestants ("Postwar Literature in English by Black Writers from South Africa" 52). The result was the creation – almost ex-nihilo – of a tradition of writing in the short story which subsequent writers (like Mzamane and Ndebele) were able to draw on. In an interview with the journal *Okella* Mzamane acknowledges the importance of his "unbroken contact with [his] people's literary tradition" (*Staffrider* 6.1 (1984): 39). This explains why, when he started writing, "without consciously thinking about it, [he] started writing short stories" (39).¹⁵ In an interview in 1987, Ndebele also acknowledges the existence of a tradition of short story writing, but contests the by-then-standard view (articulated originally by Mphahlele): "People who write stories now write them because other people had been writing them before: it has become a tradition. . . . It has less to do with the feeling that we are too angry so that we don't have time to contemplate the kind of leisure that is required for writing" (*Talking with African Writers* 150). He also points to the availability of publishing outlets as a "much more acceptable reason for the dominance of the short story" (150). Wicomb makes the important additional point that the short story is "a well-known apprentice's medium; its shortness is useful for the beginner lacking confidence . . . – you achieve something in a short space of time" (Interview with Meyer and Olver 184). Like Mphahlele (and others) she also points to the importance

¹⁴ For example: Nkosi (*Home and Exile*); Maimane ("Can't You Write About Anything Else?"); Modisane ("Short Story Writing in Black South Africa" 3); Mzamane ("The 50s and Beyond: An Evaluation" 25, 26); Gready ("The Sophiatown Writers of the Fifties" 161); Vaughan ("Currents in South African Writing in the 70s" 128).

¹⁵ This "unbroken contact" was clearly unusual; the disruptions caused by bannings and censorship have been examined in earlier chapters. Mzamane himself points out that most writers of the Black Consciousness era "began their work in a near vacuum, with few works in circulation by older writers on whom they could model their own writings" ("The Impact of Black Consciousness on Culture" 179).

of “material conditions” in determining the form of her early writing. Alluding to Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, she says: “With a small child and no room of my own (let alone the so many guineas per year) the short story was the obvious choice” (185).¹⁶ Clearly, these factors are not mutually exclusive, and in combination they go a long way towards accounting for the preference among so many black South African writers for the short story form. As we have seen, however, black writers adapt this form to their own purposes, often ignoring, modifying or even deliberately violating the conventions associated with the short story in the Western tradition.

In conclusion, and by way of acknowledging the remarkable (at times almost heroic) struggle of black South Africans to gain entry to the world of letters, and translate their experience onto the printed page, I reproduce a passage, entitled “I Remember”, from Peter Abrahams’s *Dark Testament*, published in 1942.¹⁷

“Stand up, Peter Abrahams.”

I stood up.

“Now tell the class what you want to be.”

The class had been discussing what each student wanted to be when he grew up. A few boys had wanted to be nurses. A few girls, nurses. Some had wanted to be engine-drivers. Some professors. One had wanted to get his B.A. and become a store-keeper. Every one had voiced some ambition.

I felt frightened. I was extremely self-conscious. I had reason to be. I wanted to be something that was reserved for Europeans only. I knew of non-European doctors and nurses, and even lawyers and professors. I had heard of Professor Jabavu, a Native professor. But I had never heard of any non-European being what I wanted to be.

“I want to be a writer.”

I waited for the effect. There was none. The teacher just sat smiling at me. . . .

“Why do you want to be a writer?”

My khaki shirt was torn in many places. It was very dirty. My body was not much cleaner. My khaki shorts had a great hole in the seat. Two girls behind me kept giggling at the visible parts of my

¹⁶ The South African short story which illustrates the force of these “material conditions” most vividly is Gcina Mhlope’s “The Toilet”, where a public toilet in a park provides (ironically) the only space in which the narrator/Mhlope can find the space and privacy needed to read, reflect, and write.

¹⁷ The title points to the importance of testimony (in the form of the short story and the autobiography) in black South African writing; when Mzamane entitles his introduction to *Mzala and Other Stories* “I Remember”, he is paying conscious (or perhaps unconscious) tribute to Abrahams as a forerunner and founding figure for black writers in this country.

bottom. My feet were cracked and bleeding. It was winter. There was a bump on my head from a recent fight.

“I want to be a writer so that I can write stories about everything. You know, like the stories in books. That will make me famous, and I’ll have cakes and ginger beer for breakfast, and fish and chips for lunch, and a whole fowl at night. Then I’ll be able to eat three times every day, and have shoes and a motor car, and live like the rich white people do. And then I want to wear a collar and tie. That’s why I want to write stories. . . .

I remember that afternoon particularly well, because I fainted shortly afterwards. It was very difficult to revive me. When I came to I had to admit that I’d only had a slice of bread in two days. They gave me food, but that only made me ill, so I was sent to the general hospital. I stayed there for a few weeks. They said I was suffering from starvation. Then they let me out to starve again.

Many years have passed since that day. Many things have happened. I have left Vrededorp; one of the very few who have succeeded in breaking away from the grip that it has. . . .

Many things have happened to me. But one of the most important is, that I am a writer. I have kept faith with a dream.

(*Dark Testament* 9-10)

Both Abrahams and Mphahlele went on to write autobiographies recording in graphic detail their struggle against poverty and oppression, and their nurturing of what must (to those around them) have seemed an extraordinary ambition - the ambition to be a writer. From such unlikely and inauspicious beginnings a literature has developed that does more than merely reflect or describe the circumstances of oppression. Resistance can take, and has taken, various forms, from affirmations of a modern, cosmopolitan identity (in the fifties), to jazz-inflected writing of some of the “Soweto” poets, to the “township theatre” that developed post-1976, to the more overtly politically committed work of the *Staffrider* generation. In the process a crucial shift takes place in the consciousness of the literate township elite. It was the achievement of Black Consciousness in particular to turn the apartheid ghetto into “the community, the *people*” and to transform “the predicament of oppression” into “the basis of a positive strategic identity” (Vaughan, “*Staffrider* and South African Literature” 209).¹⁸ The writing of the interregnum, on the other hand, reacts against the by-then-accepted conventions of protest or resistance writing and exhibits what might be called an

¹⁸ One needs to ask the question, Where were the woman writers? To what extent were they been silenced by a patriarchal culture, on the one hand, and the discourse of the struggle, on the other hand? Why are Tlali, Mhlope and Dike almost the only examples of successful women writers – and what obstacles did they have to overcome? (I exclude here women writing from exile, like Head or Ngcobo or Wicomb.)

“inward turn” - a more conscious and sustained exploration of interiority, an awareness of the politics of gender, and a grasp of the political and cultural complexities of the period. As Gordimer puts it, in the 1980s “many black writers of quality . . . have begun to negotiate the right to their own, inner interpretation of the essential gesture by which they are part of the black struggle” (“The Essential Gesture” 293). In the work of Ndebele and Wicomb in particular, what Attwell calls “experimentalism” enters into the tradition of the black South African short story, but an experimentalism that is “both socially connected and aesthetically reflexive” (*Rewriting Modernity* 179).

We no longer live in a society ruled in terms of a state of emergency, with troops in armoured vehicles occupying the townships, and the smell of tear gas (and incipient revolution) in the air. From the perspective of the present - of a society in the throes of a difficult transition, struggling with the legacy of the past,¹⁹ and contending with the unforgiving environment of contemporary global capitalism - this is surely a body of writing that has a great deal to offer, in terms of both insight and inspiration.²⁰

CODA

One of the many urgent challenges facing our society is the transformation of the education system and the development of a reading culture. A recent article in *The Sunday Times* (24 June 2007) begins: “More than half of South African households don’t own a single book. And one in four South Africans never reads in their spare time” (8). The article reports the results of a survey of national reading habits commissioned by the Department of Arts and Culture. Many black South Africans still lack access to books; Mdantsane, outside East London, with a population of at least 300 000, has no library. If this study encourages the rediscovery or re-evaluation of the literature written in English by black South African writers during the apartheid years, it will have served some purpose. I would endorse Degenaar’s plea (in an article in *Current Writing* in 1992) for “tolerance with regard to a variety of texts as

¹⁹ As Wicomb points out, “The reality of exclusion manifested in hunger, homelessness and illiteracy sits uncomfortably with the happy notion of nation” (“Nation, Race and Ethnicity” 19).

²⁰ I am aware that these rather generalized comments may suggest an uncritical acceptance of the prevailing master-narrative – that of “a developing and finally triumphant political confidence” among black South Africans (Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity* 9). As Attwell points out, this can result in an account where texts “are allegorized as representing particular phases or periods, like coloured pins on a battle map” (9). It is this kind of reductive reading which this study is designed to contest, by giving due attention to both the specificity of particular texts, to their informing contexts.

well as a variety of responses to texts". He argues that "without relinquishing our critical attitude, we should allow for literary works of whatever kind, in whatever language, in whatever circumstances, on whatever level of sophistication, for whatever audience" ("How Texts and their Reception will Change in the Post-Apartheid Era" 14). All the languages spoken in South Africa need to be recognised and African-language literatures in particular should be fostered and promoted. Writing in 1990, Mackenzie acknowledged the inherent value of the Ndebele's fictional project (in *Fools and Other Stories*), but pointed out that "an intervention in mass culture, with its literacy problem, dependence on visual media, and lack of access to educational facilities will have to take place on another level altogether" (31). His comments are as applicable now (after thirteen years of ANC rule) as they were then. The call made by Kunene (in an article in *Staffrider* in 1986) is also as relevant now as it was then. He discusses the paradoxical position of black writers who address their black readers or audiences in English,²¹ questions Mphahlele's claim that the *Drum* writers were creating a proletarian literature, laments the ignorance of many urban black writers of their own oral tradition (and of African-language literatures)²² and states: "What needs to be done is to break down these walls of isolation and let tradition flow" (40).

²¹ This question was discussed in relation to the work of R.R.R. Dhlomo, and does not need extended treatment here. In a recent article, De Kock examines the decision by a gathering of "eminent black South African writers" (the African Authors Conference) in 1936 to insist on writing in English: "Africans must write for Africans, but English is the medium through which Africans can be reached. It is impossible to produce a national literature through the use of a tribal language; only tribal literature will result" ("Sitting for the Civilisation Test" 393).

²² According to Russel Kaschula, head of the School of Languages at Rhodes University, "the only book that sells in the indigenous languages is the Bible. . . . This is a result of the continual oppression and trivialization of indigenous literatures." There is, he says, "little or no adult readership" of literature in isiXhosa: "It is truly a sad day when a nation's literature depends on prescription for a school market in order to survive" ("isiXhosa literature needs to break free of its fetters" 9).

APPENDIX

Mhlutshwa Comes To Johannesburg¹

DISSATISFACTION WITH FARM LIFE DRIVES HIM TO TOWN

(BY A.S. VIL-NKOMO)

The sun was about to rest in the distant Golden West. Two boys watched it from the door of their hut. One, the younger, looked out contentedly. His herds were all safe in the kraal and he could see the smoke curling round the big black pot in the yard where the evening porridge was smoothly cooking. Its sweet smell came to him on the evening air. But the elder boy was not thinking of the porridge, or of the long sleep till morning in the corner of the hut. He looked far out to the sinking sun. His face was troubled.

“Tell me, dear brother, why are you so sad today, asked Sibiziwe.

Essential Education

“I am tired of farm life, I am going to Johannesburg where I can gain the knowledge so essential to our race.”

“Well, that may be your reason, but I who am younger than you fail to see the force of your argument. Are we not happy? Is the open life after all not the best for us? What is money compared with health?”

“That is true,” said Mhlutsa (sic), “but you do not know all. Listen to this.”

“Mother was a descendent of the Bapedis, but she was born on this farm of Frits Silljie’s. Father’s family came from Zululand; he was born at Grats Rand. One day Baas Frits Silljie’s wife took it into her head to visit her cousin at Grats Rand. She took mother with her, who was then a mere girl.

“In the course of their visit at Baas Barren Vermaak’s plaas she was attracted by an outah, who made up his mind to marry her. As he was engaged in the kitchen he of all the boys had the best opportunity to meet new faces. Hesitatingly she agreed to his proposal thinking that this would be a way to off-load the tyranny of Has-Broek Farm.

¹ The story was published in *Bantu World*, 29 April 1933.

Death of Parents

“However, it was left to the employers of our father and mother to arrange the details of the marriage, and this is how it was done. Our father had to pay a suitable ‘Lobola’ to Baas Vermaak, as a security that he would not desert from Baas Frits. The marriage ceremony was also arranged for them, and took place before Predikant Jacob Hlabane of the Heroomde Kerk. They then left for the farm. Oh yes! Those were happy days.

“Howbeit a few months after you were born our father died suddenly and this was the chief cause of mother’s death, which followed six months later. But the white people said her death was a result of malarial influenza. I was eight years old then, you barely a year. We were orphans, and other people’s hedgehogs. Dorkie in the meantime had been responsible for our growth. I have been working all these years as a stuur kaffir (messenger and schaaap wachter (shepherd), with no pay. I am thrashed abundantly. I was happy before, but not now. Sometimes when I pass through town I see other Native children attend school and church, and above all I see them dressed like Baas Frits’ children. You and I have no hope of ever enjoying those privileges. Look at me, see how I am dressed. Look at yourself! Hardly a shirt on! Doesn’t it seem unfair? It is a shame. Why has this white man’s God been so unkind to us?

“Oh! Mother, hear my prayer. Come back to us, do come and take us to you. It seems as if God does not like us. I am sick, Sibiziwe! Tonight I shall leave this farm, but I shall return to help you. For I learnt from Jabulane the other day that Baas Clein Hans has bought this farm. You know he is a very cruel man. He shot one of his boys to death, and told the magistrate he thought it was a buck.”

Ulitengiselani uBaas Frits iplazi lake na mfowethu? (But why is Baas Fritz selling the farm, brother?)

“Because he is in great debt, drought, etc. The Government won’t give the farmers gold money, and this gold standard we do not understand, he is therefore bankrote (sic).

“People are also starving in Johannesburg.”

“Well, I will go and see, I am coming to work on the mines, but I am coming back for you and Dorkie. I am going to make a home for all of us. Perhaps God is not so unkind after all.”

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