
By

VUKANI MDE

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Port Elizabeth

January 2002

Supervisor: Ms. MARY WEST
The financial assistance of the National Research Foundation towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the National Research Foundation.
For Nom, with love...
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contents</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: Discourse and discourse analysis</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blackness</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Consciousness Philosophy and Blacks</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline and Publish</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence: The status of women</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Kneel down, woman”: The Mother Africa trope</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: Oswald Mbuyiseli Mtshali</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3: Mongane Wally Serote</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4: Sidney Sipho Sepamla</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor, Ms Mary West, for her super-human patience and tolerance throughout the year. Anyone less generous would have long given up on the project, and on me.

I would also like to acknowledge the support, encouragement, and friendship of students and staff of the University of Port Elizabeth School of Languages. The work would not have been possible without their intellectual stimulation over the last three years. I am especially thankful for Angelo Fick’s informal, friendly yet always challenging reading groups. I have also benefited immensely from opportunities granted by Professor Helize van Vuuren to lecture, tutor and ultimately learn from her undergraduate literature classes.

I am personally grateful for the generosity and love of my mother, Lindelwa Mde, and my family’s tolerance in allowing me to get away with not helping around the house. I should mention that this work was finished despite the best efforts of Zozo and her gangs.

Over the last year I could not have done without the love and support of Snow White Dyosopu, who was always there to remind me of my duties and obligations.

I would like to acknowledge the generous financial assistance of various sponsors over the three years spent at UPE. I am particularly indebted to Vodacom and the Cape Tercentenary Foundation. I have been a recipient over the last two years of both the Vodacom/UPE Master’s Scholarship, and the Dudley D’Ewes Scholarship, awarded to me by the Foundation.


**ABSTRACT**

This dissertation re-examines an era in the production and reception of English language poetry in South Africa by black writers. Intellectually the 1970s was the Black Consciousness phase of South African history and very few aspects of life in the country were untouched by the intellectual movement led by Steve Biko and other young black student leaders. The aesthetic and literary output of the time, like all other facets of South African life, exhibited the influence and pressures brought to bear by Black Consciousness. Moreover, the Black Consciousness poets introduced the most vibrant and innovative phase for English language poetry produced in South Africa.

It is my contention, however, that such vibrancy and innovation has consistently been compromised by unsympathetic, often hostile, and almost-always ill-informed criticism. The dissertation offers a critique of the academic and journalistic practice of criticism in South Africa. I argue that critical practice in South Africa has been engaged throughout the twentieth century in the discursive enforcement of ‘discipline’. In his *Discipline and Punish* (1977) the French post-structuralist philosopher Michel Foucault demonstrated how power is wielded against oppressed/suppressed groups through self-regulated proscriptions, and argued that power is a *discursive* rather than a corporeal phenomenon. My dissertation follows Foucault in reading the critical reception of Black Consciousness poetry as the practice of disciplinary power.

The dissertation also engages critically with the poetry of Oswald Mtshali, Mongane Serote and Sipho Sepamla, and argues that their work is the inscription of black subjectivity into the literary and cultural mainstream. It situates their work within wider
societal debates and definitions of ‘blackness’. In this regard use is made again of Michel Foucault’s insights and methodology of discourse analysis as shown in The Archaeology of Knowledge (1972).

I argue that Oswald Mtshali’s work is a failed attempt at a dissection of apartheid and colonialism from a broadly Christian and humanist perspective. In my reading of Mongane Serote I explore the relationship between women’s bodies and the practice of representation. It is my contention that Serote is most concerned with claims of belonging, and this is shown through his extensive use of the trope of ‘Mother’. My discussion of the poetry of Sipho Sepamla focuses on language and (self-)representation, particularly the use of practices of naming in constructing subjectivity. My contention is that Sepamla ultimately abandons attempts at representation in favour of oppositional self-construction in language.

In the concluding chapter I defend the thesis that the politics of discipline have prevented the broad critical establishment from gaining access to these discursive constructions of blackness in the committed poetry of South Africa.
The trajectory of South African historiography reveals a foundational unity regarding the mastery of those who represent and the silence of the represented. This relation is a racial one – Desiree Lewis.

INTRODUCTION

The question at the centre of this investigation is fairly simple: what is the surviving legacy of the so-called ‘renaissance’ of black writing in South Africa that happened from the late 1960s to the late 1970s?

It is true that the writing, specifically the poetry (the genre this dissertation examines), gave South Africa a new coterie of names to be added to our understanding of what constitutes the literary canon of the country. Who, after all, does not know of Mongane Wally Serote, Sydney Sipho Sepamla, Oswald Mbuyiseli Mtshali, James Matthews, Mafika Pascal Gwala, and Chris Van Wyk?

But what is the literary legacy of the poetry in question? Rather than asking who these gentlemen of South African letters are (and it is a significant point in my dissertation that they are only gentlemen), the point of any latter-day investigation should be to ask where precisely their place is. Can the poets of South Africa’s liberation hope to be remembered (indeed to be read) beyond the present age, and who will do such reading, other than literature classes and historians of the liberation struggle?

These are the questions that need to be asked today, thirty years after the publication by Renoster Books of Oswald Mtshali’s first collection, soon to be followed by an avalanche of other poets’ collections throughout the 1970s. Moreover I shall be asking these questions from a cultural and political context in which, as Francis Fukuyama’s The End of History (1992) triumphantly tells us, the world is freshly post-
historical. This despite the persistence of the very ‘history’ with which committed poetry was always concerned.¹

Many a capable critic and academic has evaluated and re-evaluated, critiqued and defended the black poetry of the 1970s, and my own late intervention will not pretend to be anything more than a minor and narrow one. To give an example, Stephen Watson (whose critical intervention will form a major organising part of my critique of the politics of reception), concluded in his 1987 essay “Shock of the Old: What’s Become of Black Poetry?” (Selected Essays, 1990) that the legacy of black poetry is “altogether modest” (1990: 82), and that the poetry had delivered “much less than was initially anticipated” (1990: 86).

The basis of this judgment is what I would call the unfinished project of Black Consciousness, the usage in literature of politico-cultural concepts and ideas not fully negotiated in the broader realm of cultural politics. Watson’s essay complained that the seventies had seen “the development of a cultural climate which, if anything, was exclusive rather than inclusive, centripetal rather than centrifugal” and pointed out that “no literature…could be long sustained by such intrinsically threadbare notions as ‘blackness’ or ‘black experience’” (1990: 84).

It would be wrong to follow Watson far down the road of intellectual objections to the conceptual framework of the poetry under discussion. “Stupefying intellectual poverty” (1990: 85) in literature is as much a result of criticism as it is one of writing.

At this point I should turn to a brief justification of methodology. Any practice of selection is always at the same time a practice of exclusion. My thesis will deal with the works of Oswald Mtshali, Mongane Serote, and Sipho Sepamla only. This obviously and

¹ See also Albie Sachs’s interesting and controversial 1989 position paper in Writing South Africa, 1998.
unjustifiably leaves out many names associated with South Africa’s committed poetry of the 1970s. The most glaring exclusion will be Mafika Gwala, identified by Michael Chapman, along with the three above-mentioned writers, as “the chief practitioners [of post-Sharpville committed poetry]” (1984: 182). I will freely admit that my own appreciation of this poetry has never extended to the work of Gwala. However I do not mean to construe personal preference as a matter of ‘taste’. The only convincing justification I can offer is that of lack of space.

My study of the three poets is a theoretical re-examination of their work, an attempt to seek out threads in their work that are indicative of the politico-cultural environment, and is an exploration of the dominant motifs in each poet’s work. Without this becoming another theoretical overdetermination of the conceptual framework of Black Consciousness, I intend to read Sepamla, Serote and Mtshali for the unities that are discernible within their respective oeuvres; discursive unities which may perhaps be some of the more important maps we have of the politics of black identity of their time in South Africa.

It is important that we read the work of these poets within a general investigation of the history of discourses of blackness in the South Africa of the last century. For such an investigation, it is necessary to transcend the natural limits imposed by a study of one, three, or even a dozen writers, thinkers or poets. Such transcendence should lead us, not towards a generalised analysis and its attendant prejudices, but towards a study, in the Foucauldian sense, of the discursive practices of the twentieth century in South Africa. It should be clear from this that discourses of blackness and black identity among writers and thinkers, and how these discourses impact on the practice of self/representation in the
poetry of Oswald Mtshali, Mongane Serote, and Sipho Sepamla, may be a more fruitful departure point than strategies of reading that have been traditionally employed. And, writing in the Preface to his first systematic study of discourse in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), Foucault points out that “the historical analysis of… discourse should, in the last resort, be subject, not to a theory of the knowing subject, but rather to a theory of discursive practice”, for “discourse in general…is so complex a reality that we not only can, but should, approach it at different levels and with different methods” (1972: xiv, my emphasis).

The literary interpretation of poets, and the situation of interpreted poets along a ‘liberal-to-resistance’ spectrum based on the ‘themes’ or ‘spirit’ of their work, is but one of the different possible levels and methods of analysis of the poetry of South Africa. It has been the dominant one, often resulting in the absence of a thoroughgoing and theoretically informed discursive analysis. I will argue that the body of criticism that produces the conclusions of Stephen Watson, for instance, is characterised mostly by an unacknowledged privileging of the writing subject.

Chapter One provides an exploration of the theoretical ground to be traversed in my readings of the poetry and its reception. In it, I map out the practice of Foucauldian discourse analysis, which will be the method of entry into ideas of blackness in the committed poetry. I also engage with the Foucauldian concern with power as multidimensional, which is a crucial discussion for a reading of the critical practice as a site of power. In Chapter One I also reconsider the role of the woman’s body in Black Consciousness signifying practices, especially the use of tropes of mothering in constructing nationhood and identity.
Chapter Two explores what may be described as ‘meditations on the black man’s burden’ in the poetry of Oswald Mtshali. I re-read Mtshali’s work as an attempt to self-dissect the dual legacy of Christianity among black South Africans of Mtshali’s social position.

In Chapter Three I return to the issues of women and their bodies in representation, in the poetry of Mongane Serote, with emphasis on his uses of tropes of mothering and belonging. I also explore the ways in which Serote attempts to write himself into the urban landscape of South Africa, in opposition to apartheid’s contestations and denial of (urban) citizenship to blacks.

Chapter Four offers a re/reading of the poetry of Sipho Sepamla, and explores the ways in which language is deployed to unmask the play of representation. Class, gender and other forms of othering are explored in Sepamla’s work to reveal the divisions and fissures within blackness, as well as to reveal the tensions – and set the limits – of representation.

The concluding chapter of the dissertation is a re-examination of the literature of reception that has structured and regulated our consumption of committed poetry. This is not to set my sights on targeted (white) theorists and to attack them for their supposed shortcomings, or the alleged limitations of liberalism, their particular ideology. In fact a critique of the type I propose applies equally to black writers and theorists. Rather I re/read the literature of reception in an attempt to unmask the operation of discursive and especially disciplinary power.
Perhaps the aesthetic should be defined in opposition to the anaesthetic. Art is the struggle to stay awake – Jeremy Cronin.

CHAPTER 1

Discourse and discourse analysis

Why, one may ask, a Foucauldian analysis of discourse as a way of reading the representations of blackness in the South African poetry of this period? Why this methodology and not another? Why Foucault? Would it not be better to read each poet of the seventies (or any era) individually, and individually try to contextualise and categorise him/her in the broader trend of the country, the continent, the genre, et cetera? Rather than attempting to find ‘unities of discourse’, reading the ‘pure’ or ‘real’ poetry may be considered a better way of marking the place of the poetry in history and, presumably, of (re-)evaluating it freely of any ideology and theoretical pre-disposition.

It should be remembered, however, that we are dealing with the work of men who are (or were) not, first and foremost, poets. Their work was the poetic articulation and re-articulation of discursive positions that had been negotiated and contested in black South Africa for at least half a century, in response to a fraught political situation. (Interestingly, none of the three men continue to write today, at least not poetry). Therefore any analysis and re-evaluation that fails to proceed from a discursive context, in favour of foregrounding textual practice, will produce definitive conclusions of the kind reached by Watson’s 1987 essay. In re/reading the poetry of Mtshali, Sepamla, and Serote then, one is dealing, as writes Foucault, with “a population of events in the space of discourse in general. One is therefore led to the project of a pure description of
discursive events as the horizon for the search for the unities that form within it” (1972: 27).

In reviewing the reception and evaluation of the committed Black Consciousness poets, we should remember also that we are dealing with the operation of multi-dimensional practices of power. Power, note Levett, Kottler, Burman and Parker in their *Culture, Power and Difference* (1997):

is not the exercise of some dramatic force emanating from a single point at the apex of the state. The power of apartheid was relayed through millions of channels of communication, from the government-controlled media through to everyday conversation. *Power is, rather, a function of a multiplicity of discursive practices that fabricates and positions subjects* (1997: 3, my emphasis).

The “power of apartheid” has, of course, also been relayed through systems of education and, crucially, evaluation and publication. It seems to me that up to this point, no critique of the poetry (or literature) of South Africa has engaged with discursive analyses that treat the publishing house, the university faculty, the newspaper literary review and other sites of evaluation, as multiple discursive practices that are complicit in the fabrication of (both black and white/colonised and colonising) subjects. Therefore it will be important in the following chapters to adopt a strategy of reading that acknowledges and takes as a starting point the play of discursive power in the South African context, even in situations that appear to be – or are claimed as – ‘neutral’, as is the case with the reception of literature and the creation of canons. I will make use of Foucauldian discourse analytic approaches that:

allow us to connect directly with issues of power and subjectification. These approaches help…address how we are made into selves that speak, how we experience the self as if it were an individual enclosed thing, and the way in which modes of disciplinary apparatus govern us (1997: 2).
My section on the reception and evaluation of committed poetry in South Africa (see ‘Discipline and Publish’, below) will expand fully on the function of these disciplinary apparatuses specifically in the academy and the publishing/literary establishment, in producing subjects. (I deploy the concept ‘produce’ very deliberately: power is not just permanently repressive, but also always performative and productive).

**Blackness**

My analysis of the questions and issues of ‘blackness’ as a discourse in South Africa begins, historically speaking, in the early twentieth century. In a study of discourses and their counters, of trends in thought and culture, it is not possible to speak, with temporal certainty, of a beginning. While it is true that 1912, and the formation of the South African National Native Congress, is important, it is not possible to assign the occurrence of real events as the beginnings of discourses (Foucault, 1972: 25). The formation of the ANC marks the recommended point of origin, rather than a definitive one.\(^2\)

These early beginnings lead us to the question: who, in South Africa, is black? The Black Consciousness-inspired poetry of the 1970s, besides articulating militant resistance to oppression and to the everyday humiliations of racism, was also crucially involved in the debates and practice of black self-definition that had engaged black politics of the 1950s, and which had reached something of a peak in the decade dominated by the Black Consciousness movement. Throughout the 1950s this politics of self-definition was mostly manifest in the debates around ‘Africans’ and ‘Africanness’ that eventually led to the breakaway of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) from the dominant liberation

---

\(^2\) The nineteenth century is, after all, rich with articulations of black identity and nationalist resistance of colonization, while it is possible to argue that the early ANC was concerned merely with a bourgeois reformist project that eschewed a black identity politics.
movement, the African National Congress (ANC). Besides practical objections about the presence and influence of whites in the ANC’s organisational structures, PAC founders also differed with their ANC comrades over matters of racial definition, a difference that led them, by the late 1950s, towards a subjective definition of ‘Africans’ as all citizens who owed their allegiance to Africa.³ By contrast, the emergence of Black Consciousness in the late 1960s marked the rejection of this subjective and exclusive definition of ‘African’, towards a definition of ‘Blacks’ that was both inclusive and objective. It was inclusive in that Indian and coloured South Africans were also recognised as belonging to the oppressed group and a crucial part of any action towards liberation; and objective in that it did not offer the possibility of exclusion or inclusion by appeal to one’s allegiance, but rather by reference to the objective situation of one in the racial power structure of apartheid South Africa. All those who were situated as objects of race hatred and official discrimination in South Africa’s apartheid system (which, to varying degrees, included all black groups) met the objective criteria of ‘Blackness’ in Black Consciousness understanding. Those on whose behalf the system of exploitation functioned – whether they supported it or not – could not claim allegiance or shared action with the cause of Blacks. (This point was indeed the central cause in the well-known Black Consciousness dismissal of white liberal claims, a point to which I return later.) Black people who were collaborators or indirect beneficiaries of the racial system – such as homeland leaders and Black Local Authorities, could not claim allegiance either. Steve Biko’s own pronouncements in I Write What I Like were explicit in this regard:

We have defined blacks …as those who are by law or tradition politically, economically, and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society, and identifying themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realisation of their aspirations (1996: 48).

Moreover, Biko and his contemporaries specified that being black was not about skin pigmentation or other physical traits, but was rather the “reflection of a mental attitude” (1996: 48) and reclaiming the term ‘Black’ was one step along the road to self-emancipation.

The re-definition, re-evaluation and re-investment of the label ‘Black’ challenged and ultimately transformed a white prejudice of blackness as a negative signifier, and sought to replace this with a positive investment in blackness. Indeed, ‘Black’ was now to be understood as a badge of honour not to be bestowed easily on anyone. Those among black people who were deemed not to deserve the honour of the label would be left only with the entirely disparaging tag of ‘non-white’: “Anyone who says “Baas” to a white man is, ipso facto, a non-white” (1996: 48).

This political definition of blacks as supportive of Black Consciousness was echoed by one of the leading poets of Black Consciousness, Mongane Serote. In his essay “Feeling the Waters”, published in Michael Chapman’s Soweto Poetry (1982), Serote defined the project of liberation in these terms:

The issue is not whether apartheid must be done away with in South Africa; apartheid has to and will go. The issue is, indeed, that we black people of South Africa are determined to uproot everything that has so far anchored itself as South African. We are determined to build a new country free of racism, poverty and ignorance. In short, we are determined to free our country of exploitation of man by man. And anyone, black or white, who stands in the path of that defines himself as the enemy (1982: 112).
In the dual attempt to conceive of a ‘Black’ community that was all-inclusive and greater than its constituent parts, as well as clearly set the limits and boundaries of inclusion, Black Consciousness was involved in the social construction of what Benedict Anderson has called, in his seminal study of nationalism, an “imagined community” (1983). My assertion that Black Consciousness and its adherents attempted to create an imagined community of ‘Blackness’ is strengthened by Kogila Moodley’s claim, in her essay “The Continued Impact of Black Consciousness” from *Bounds of Possibility* (1991), that the conceptual power of the movement relied on the development of “a fictive kinship” between the three black groups “who have experienced the shared indignity of oppression and material deprivation” (1991: 150).

**Black Consciousness Philosophy and Blacks**

Black Consciousness began, according to CRR Halisi’s *Bounds of Possibility* essay “Biko and Black Consciousness Philosophy: An Interpretation”, as the “theoretical expression of a younger generation” of blacks rethinking the politics of struggle in South Africa (1991: 100). It was, however, a theoretical expression articulated not only in opposition to the apartheid state, but also in response to the almost decade-long lull in anti-apartheid organisation following the Rivonia setbacks of the early 1960s.

Black Consciousness instinctively involved a deconstruction of the tradition of African nationalism and nationalist opposition in South Africa. According to Halisi, Black Consciousness “incorporate[d] the distinct traditions of black thought in South Africa, anti-colonialism and liberation politics in Africa and the diaspora, and New Left student radicalism” (1991: 101). Because of this synthesis, Black Consciousness tended
to reject, as New Left radical politics did, all established ideologies, including those of
the Old Left that claimed to be progressive and anti-capitalist. This form of New Left
wholesale rejection resulted in the innovations and tensions evident, for instance, in the
critique of capitalism and Christianity developed in Oswald Mtshali’s poetry. If one adds
into this mix the consideration that Black Consciousness also accommodated what
became known as ‘liberation theology’ or ‘black theology’, incorporating the idea that
Christianity could be deployed as a weapon in the fight for liberation, then the tension
between revolutionary synthesis, on the one hand, and revolutionary wholesale rejection,
on the other, is heightened. For instance, Mtshali’s Black Consciousness-inspired poetry,
I will argue later, is largely the dissection of a dual heritage received from Christian
teaching in South Africa.

According to Halisi the very phrase “Black Consciousness philosophy” suggests a
discourse unique to the victims of white racism in apartheid South Africa (1991: 106). It
also suggests a far broader platform of black opinion and aspiration, in contrast to the
more specific (or parochial) politics of African nationalism expounded by the ANC of the
early-to-mid century. Significantly, Black Consciousness was a student-driven
movement that grew in the late 1960s – the so-called ‘decade of protest’ – and was
initiated and articulated as a philosophy by the South African Students’ Organisation
(SASO), the black campus student body.

In explaining the massive influence of Black Consciousness thought on, and its
practice in, committed poetry, it is necessary to reflect on the role that the movement
reserved for culture as a site of oppression and struggle. The thinkers who may be
considered the intellectual leaders of the New Left – Michel Foucault, Malcolm X,
Antonio Gramsci, and Franz Fanon, among others – placed great emphasis on culture and often specified literature as a means towards psychological liberation under oppressive conditions. It is from these New Left thinkers that the movement took its concern for the site of culture, a concern which led Black Consciousness to exercise an influence on cultural workers that had not been enjoyed by the mainstream liberation movements up to that point, to the extent that an entire era of poetry in South Africa became synonymous with Black Consciousness thought. Black Consciousness, and the New Left movement in general, differed from traditional Left understandings of liberation politics, in their concern with the mass of the people and, especially, their education for struggle and liberation. In contrast to Old Left insistence on a ‘vanguard movement’ for sensitising people about oppression, Black Consciousness “concluded that mass education could be accomplished by committed intellectuals armed with a knowledge of popular culture” (1991: 109).

The history and development of Black Consciousness in this country, and especially the central place of Steve Biko in it, is well documented.4 Add to the already existing extensive and authoritative sources an up-coming biography by Xolela Mangcu, a leading Biko scholar and director of the Steve Biko Foundation, and one is not at a loss for sources on Biko and Black Consciousness. It is not, therefore, an aim of my dissertation to add to the already existing body of writing on this era of our history. Suffice for me to say that of a compelling group of young black intellectuals and community activists who took up the challenge of leadership in the 1970s, Steve Biko was the most persuasive, and

---

4 See Millard Arnold’s Steve Biko, 1978; Tom Lodge’s Black Politics in South Africa since 1945, 1983; Mokgethi Motlhabi’s The Theory and Practice of Black Resistance to Apartheid, 1984; Donald Woods’s seminal Biko, 1978,1987; and Biko’s own collected essays, I Write What I Like, 1996.
his legacy the most enduring. It is his name that has come to be synonymous with the entire movement, and his words and writings to which all turn for enlightenment about and definitions of Black Consciousness. It is not an oversimplification of history or an exaggeration, to turn directly to his writings in order to expand on the nature of Black Consciousness and its influence on committed poetry.

Any process of liberation for black people, it was believed, would necessarily begin with blacks themselves. Biko pointed out in I Write What I Like, that people who are convinced of their own inferiority and the inevitability of their oppression do not fight to free themselves. And the institutional structures of white domination have, since the beginning of colonialism, buttressed and reinforced this self-replicating inferiority:

The logic behind white domination is to prepare the black man [sic] for the subservient role in this country. Not so long ago this used to be freely said in parliament even about the education system of the black people. It is still said even today, although in much more sophisticated language. 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 man only in form. This is the extent to which the process of dehumanisation has advanced (1996: 28).

Therefore, considering this overwhelming success of the colonial/apartheid power structures, the first battle to be won by those who would lead blacks to liberation would be to break down the intellectual and cultural edifice of inferiority/superiority, to “make the black man [sic] come to himself; to pump back life into [the] empty shell,” and to remind black people of the their “complicity in the crime” (1996:29) of their oppression. From the very beginning Biko conceived Black Consciousness as an inward-looking process. The intent of Black Consciousness, in direct opposition to “the machine”, is to produce at the output end of its own processes, “real” (1996: 29) black people who do not
regard themselves as inferior to white society, or as appendages of that society. This truth, said Biko, is one that could not be reversed:

We do not need to apologise for this because it is true that the white system(s) have produced throughout the world a number of peoples who are not aware that they too are people (1996: 51).

What was the extent of the impact and influence of Black Consciousness politics on the work of the three writers under consideration, or indeed on their generation of black writers? One of the factors accounting for the impact of the Black Consciousness movement on culture and, especially, writing was the absence of literary predecessors for an entire generation of writers in the 1970s. Mbulelo Mzamane has argued in his Bounds of Possibility essay, “The Impact of Black Consciousness on Culture”, that without the possibility of being influenced by an earlier generation and other traditions of writing from elsewhere, writers were perhaps more receptive to the influence of a powerful and liberatory ideological movement, an ideological movement that offered them at least the possibility of thematic grounding for their work.

Many of those who wrote during the Sophiatown ‘golden age’ of the 1950s had, by the 1960s, been driven to exile and their work – which had been mainly autobiography, short prose, and journalism – was unavailable because of bannings. Some, like Nat Nakasa and Can Themba, had succumbed to the soul-destroying melancholy of exile. For young black writers casting their eyes about for inspiration, the 1960s in apartheid South Africa was a discouraging time: a complete cultural vacuum, non-existent markets, rare publishing opportunities, an educational and ideological apparatus that was forever re-emphasising their supposed inferiority and justifying their oppression, and complete isolation from literary and intellectual currents elsewhere. Biko’s celebrated injunction
“Black man, you’re on your own!” must have sounded, to the likes of Oswald Mtshali, Sipho Sepamla and Mongane Serote, more than just apt. It was a rallying call to write the cultural experience of black people into the mainstream. What Mbulelo Mzamane has called the insistence of Black Consciousness that blacks should address themselves to blacks may have had a powerful appeal to young writers of the era (1991: 183).

Black Consciousness also tapped into the defiant, young, devil-may-care mood that replaced the quiet acquiescence of the 1960s. With a younger generation not linked with earlier forms of peaceful anti-apartheid organisation, the attitude informing political action in the 1970s was all-or-nothing impatience. The immediate medium of poetry was well suited to communicate this.

Mbulelo Mzamane (1991: 185) suggests also that cultural expression and political agitation through popular culture thrive when people live under oppression. Far from disappearing, repressed and frustrated political energies are often dispersed towards other forms of social action and agitation. With political organisations banned, no recognised black trade unions, and all other avenues of legitimate political action closed by the 1970s, culture and writing remained the only areas of life still offering small openings and possibilities for the oppressed to enter as actors able to claim their agency. It is also true that as a social movement Black Consciousness paid closer attention to issues of culture than other liberation organisations. At a time, writes Mzamane, “whe[n] overt extra-parliamentary opposition attracted swift and brutal retribution, the need for less overtly political expression meant that Black Consciousness paid more attention to historical, cultural and artistic issues” (1991: 185).
Discipline and Publish: The reception and ‘evaluation’ of black poetry

The Foucauldian concept of ‘discipline’ may best be employed to characterise the various ways in which a dominant power – whether cultural, political, or economic – establishes, maintains, and consolidates its hegemony over its subjects. Despite the morbid occupation and general subject of Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1977) (imprisonment and torture as forms of punishment), I do not interpret Foucault as exclusively concerned with the repressive physical apparatuses of state. At least for the purposes of studying and critiquing the reception of committed poetry in South Africa, I will interpret and employ ‘discipline’ as the multiple cultural and ideological means that ‘make’ individuals within a given power configuration:

> [I]t is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise. It is not a triumphant power, which because of its own excess can pride itself on its omnipotence; it is a modest, suspicious power, which functions as a calculated but permanent economy. These are humble modalities, minor procedures, as compared with the majestic rituals of sovereignty or the great apparatuses of the state…The success of disciplinary power derives no doubt from the use of simple instruments; hierarchical observation, normalising judgement and their combination in a procedure that is specific to it, the examination (1977: 170).

It is this imperative of “hierarchical observation” that, according to Foucault, led and guided eighteenth-century France in building the physical structure of its state institutions: hospitals, schools, prisons, working-class housing estates, asylums, and military camps. Power, according to this understanding, constructs for its subjects sites of unobserved observation in order to ‘train’ and regulate correct behaviour:

> Train vigorous bodies, the imperative of health; obtain competent officers, the imperative of qualification; create obedient soldiers, the
imperative of politics; prevent debauchery and homosexuality, the imperative of morality (1977: 172).

To this impressive catalogue we may add the academic and cultural need to set vigorous standards, the cultural imperative of docility and political acquiescence. The movement towards hierarchical observation was also to be read in elementary teaching of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The development of parish schools – later to be mirrored exactly in the colonies by the importation of mission schools – and the absence of regulatory methods led to the development of a system of supervision (1977: 175).

This, according to Foucault, resulted in a gradual definition of ‘roles’ for the best pupils as a mock army of classroom officers, whose duties were to do mostly with surveillance and supervision. The very practice of teaching has thus developed as a mechanism synonymous and symbiotic with surveillance and supervision. The school has developed since the eighteenth century as an institution of “the mutual type” (1977: 176) inside which cohere the three procedures of (a) teaching proper, (b) the acquisition of knowledge through the practice of pedagogical activity, and (c) hierarchical observation:

A relation of surveillance, defined and regulated, is inscribed at the heart of the practice of teaching, not as an additional or adjacent part, but as a mechanism that is inherent to it and which increases its efficiency (1977: 176).

It must be remembered that these ‘innovations’ in the pedagogical philosophy and practice of the eighteenth century in France were later to be refined and extended to all of Europe, and from there exported as ‘benevolent’ missionary education to the overseas possessions of colonial Europe. In South Africa, the early twentieth century was a period of the refinement and extension of this philosophy and practice of education. This was
largely made possible with the development of colonial further education institutions like Lovedale (initially exclusively dedicated to ‘educating’ black teachers in elementary teaching) and, later, Fort Hare University College.

The institution and mechanisms of hierarchical observation are not (at least in the colonial setting) confined only to elementary, secondary and tertiary education. Since the initial propagation and development of ‘literacy’, various literary media have been deployed in the practice of discipline and observation. The development of publishing presses, it will be remembered, was initially tied closely to the consolidation of missionary education. The Lovedale Press, first to publish religious translations, imaginative work, and other texts in Xhosa, was started not by publishers, but by the missionary educators of the Lovedale School. The practice of criticism and evaluation, both in the profession of journalism and the academy, also largely followed the norms and ‘standards’ associated with this cultural power structure of school and publishing press.

Thus the South African practice of criticism, in academic institutions and in literary journals, has always been the demonstration and the extension of this power in a particularly repressive setting. It is a power that, because of its apparent innocuous intent, is all the more repressive. It is a power that, through its “minor procedures” and “humble modalities”, functions as a “humble but permanent economy” in its imperative to regulate and silence black utterance. The power of discipline and observation is inherent in Stephen Watson’s “Shock of the Old” (1990: 82-87), in a number of authoritative statements like:

the achievements of ‘black’ poetry over the last fifteen years or so remain altogether modest. Like the photograph of the girl in Philip
Larkin’s poem, the poetry itself grows smaller and clearer as the years go by (1990: 83).

Any celebration of the poetry is, we are told, “stupid at worst, premature at best”. Interestingly, and without irony, Watson blames ‘the system’ in order to charitably excuse the poetry (“to say all this is not to blame…the writers themselves”) and exonerate the poets for the parlous state of their work: “Behind the slight and mostly withered flowerings of this poetry can be discerned the deprivations of Bantu Education” (1990: 84). This mostly patronising verdict is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, pointing to Bantu Education and other repressive forms of silencing black utterance suggests an implicit exoneration of the institutional power of discipline wielded by the likes of Watson himself. To locate the power to silence in apartheid is to deny the presence of that power in the very body politic of the white society. The power of discipline eschews the triumphant and repressive excesses of state power. Indeed its wielders may declare themselves expressly against the state, and may shout in outrage against its identifiable excesses and all its forms, but contained in that protest is an unspoken trade-off with repressed subjects: in return for protesting with you, we reserve the right to delineate the limits of your own protests.

Secondly, by mentioning Bantu Education Watson slips into his critique a subtle reminder to the criticised, of the nature of their relationship of observation and discipline: while the critic sympathises with the efforts of his subjects (indeed Watson praises the “heroic efforts” of the poets), their position as graduates of Bantu Education sets the intellectual limits to their utterance. The generous concession to the “deprivations of Bantu Education” is not without the play of disciplinary power. Indeed, long before the destructive presence of Bantu Education, wielders of disciplinary power were given to
expressing pleasant surprise at the exceptional ability of some black writers, despite their natural racial inferiority. Witness the arrogance, the condescension, the patronising smugness of this reaction to Sol Plaatje’s *Native Life in South Africa* (1916), reprinted in the 1969 Negro Universities Press edition, from a September 1910 review in the *Pretoria News*:

> Mr. Plaatje’s articles on native affairs have been marked by the robust common sense and moderation characteristic of Mr. Booker Washington. He realizes the great debt which the Natives owe to the men who brought civilization to South Africa. He is no agitator or firebrand, no stirrer up of bad feelings between black and white. He accepts the position which the Natives occupy today in the body politic as the natural result of their lack of education and civilization. He is devoted to his own people, and notes with ever-increasing regret the lack of understanding and knowledge of those people, which is palpable in the vast majority of the letters and leading articles written on the native question. As an educated Native with liberal ideas he rather resents the power and authority of the uneducated native chiefs who govern by virtue of their birth alone, and he writes and speaks for an entirely new school of native thought. The opinion of such a man ought to carry weight when native affairs are being discussed (1969: 10).

From the above it becomes clear that Watson is engaged in a practice of power long established in South Africa even before Bantu Education, before apartheid, before the Black Consciousness poets and their critics. This practice of disciplinary power, the very existence of the position of observation, was never lost on the leaders of Black Consciousness. Steve Biko’s first article under the nom de plume ‘Frank Talk’, on the role and history of white liberal action in South Africa (1996: 20-26), identifies the power of discipline that marks interaction between blacks and whites of liberal persuasion:

> The role of the white liberal in the black man’s history in South Africa is a curious one. Very few black organisations were not under white direction. True to their image, the white liberals always knew what was good for the blacks and told them so. The wonder
of it all is that black people have believed in them for so long (1996: 20).

But black people, in fact, no longer “believed in them”. Chris van Wyk’s homage to Thami Mnyele – which includes the poet’s take on the role of what was derided as ‘the Liberal establishment’ – is ample testimony to this:

We can’t meet here, brother.
We can’t talk here in this cold stone world
where whites buy time on credit cards.

I can’t hear you, brother!
for the noise of theorists
and the clanging machinery of the liberal Press!

I want to smell the warmth of your friendship, Thami
Not the pollution of gunsmoke and white suicides.

We can’t meet here, brother.
Let’s go to your home
Where we can stroll in the underbrush of your paintings
Discuss colour
Hone assegais on the edges of serrated tongues (Staffrider, vol.1, no.2, 1978).

The power and the structures of ‘discipline’ predate the existence of Van Wyk’s ‘liberal press’ by at least a century. Oswald Mtshali’s Fireflames (1980) poem “Back to the bush” (1980: 47-9) is addressed to the 100-year old legacy of disciplinary power:

So, goodbye, Father Cockerel,
I am going back to the bush,
I put on my dashiki or beshu,
comb my hair in a bushy style.
When you hear the black goat bleat
know that I have cut its throat
drunk its blood as a sacrifice
bathed myself in its bile
so that I will forever stay,
black, beautiful, and proud.
While I will argue later that Mtshali’s poetry often exchanges an oppressive ‘white’ aesthetic for an equally damaging ‘black’ aesthetic – damaging because it is essentially a value-switching internalisation of the ‘white’ one – it is instructive to note here that the problem of cultural alienation that Mtshali identifies is located within the system of benevolent education provided by missionaries (“Father Cockerel”).

Priya Narismulu, in a 1998 essay titled “‘Here be Dragons’: Challenging ‘Liberal’ Constructions of Protest Poetry”, attempted to explain this missionary-critical phenomenon by pointing to the marginality of those engaged in critical practices:

[T]he ideological position of [liberal critics] clarifies the dilemma of some settler cultures: never substantive and too remote from the European centre, they compensated for their marginality by asserting their power in the ex-colony as neo-colonial guardians of access to the centre of cultural life (1998: 192-3).

The extent to which this is true, and the extent to which Black Consciousness registered a shift in the way the critical practice was viewed, can be gleaned from comments made by Mtshali to Ursula Barnett in 1973, for an interview published in Chapman’s Soweto Poetry (1982). Asked to identify whom he wrote for, Mtshali retorts:

Many whites don’t care a damn about the feeble efforts I make. I once thought I could evangelise and convert whites to give us back our dignity. But now I have abandoned that line of approach. It is naïveté at its highest. I have now turned to inspire my fellow blacks to be proud, to strive, to seek their true identity as a single and solid group (1982: 100).

Mtshali’s essay in the same volume, “Black Poetry in South Africa: What it Means”, reconfirms the essentially Black Consciousness nature of much of their commitment (1982: 109-112). He notes the tendency of the reception of their poetry to “sinisterise” and deligitimise committed poetry. The suspicion towards the very practice of criticism
ran deep among 1970s black poets. “What right,” asked Mafika Gwala in a *Momentum* (1984) essay titled “Writing as a Cultural Weapon”, “does the academic have to judge my style of writing? What guidelines outside the culture of domination has he applied?” (1984: 48). The point of my own work is to provide the simple answer, ‘none’. What Gwala identifies as “the culture of domination” is what I have already elaborated upon as the practice of ‘discipline’. There are no critical assumptions outside the politico-cultural structures of ‘discipline’. I will now turn to the other conceptual occupation of the dissertation: in what ways will I read the politics of representation in the poetry of Oswald Mtshali, Sipho Sepamla and Mongane Serote?

**Absence: The Status of Women**

In the political understanding and in the literature of the Black Consciousness movement, the fault lines of the South African society of the twentieth century were defined by race. According to Mamphela Ramphele, writing in her “The Dynamics of Gender Within Black Consciousness Organisations: A Personal View” in *Bounds of Possibility* (1991: 214-27), issues of gender and other forms of oppression did not figure in the political programme of their movement. In fact, Black Consciousness has been much criticised retrospectively for its blind spots, especially for the social realities of gender and class. Women, in the words of Ramphele, were “involved in the movement because they were black. Gender as a political issue was not raised at all” (1991: 215).

This reality of the relationship of Black Consciousness (or indeed the broader *liberation* movement) with gender is consistent with bell hooks’s *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (1995) insights on the discursive relationship of gender and “race talk”:

30
When race and racism are the topic in public discourse the voices that speak are male...Traditionally seen as a discourse between men just as feminism has been seen as the discourse of women, it [the playing field of race discourse] presumes that there is only one gender when it comes to blackness so black women’s voices do not count (1995: 1).

In a political context where there is no feminist discourse to speak of, such an attitude is especially damaging. Quite simply in South Africa’s history of liberation, ‘gender talk’ has been seen as nothing short of divisive.\(^5\) Gender was treated in very much the same terms that the liberation movements (in their early histories) reserved for socialist and Marxist discourses, which were accused of a distracting pre-occupation with class. Any progressive feminist discourse was usually quickly situated within and among other sites of politics. Hence the silencing of women stems, more often than not, from a belief or a fear that women would crowd the field with ‘other’ considerations; that they would muddy the waters with their pre-occupation with ‘less important’ political struggles. Where race is the talk, middle class men (both black and white) are the interlocutors, and no ‘gender’ and ‘class talk’ will be tolerated.

Black thinkers and writers often uncritically accept patriarchy, and their strategies for liberation often involve the support for and strengthening of (black) patriarchy. This, for instance, has undoubtedly been the case in the United States, where

Delaney, Bu Bois, Douglass, Garvey, Cleaver, George Jackson, King, [and] Malcolm X, often...suggest that the wounds of white supremacy will be healed as black men assert themselves not as decolonised free subjects in struggle but as “men” (1995: 69).

One need only read the literature cursorily to recognise that the name Biko also belongs in that list. Black Consciousness is an attempt to defend the integrity of the race, and the

integrity of the race is the same thing as the integrity of black masculinity; hence the over-elaboration on ‘the Black man’ within BC. It was thought that not just the humanity of ‘the Black man’ had been attacked by white supremacy, but most crucially, his manhood had been undermined.

I will show in the following chapters that contain my re/reading of three committed poets that these gender shortcomings of Black Consciousness are reflected in the poetry. The poetry that I will re/read, because of its unspoken gender assumptions, is caught in a double bind. The subject represented by committed poetry is ‘He’. This is the case, for instance, with Mtshali’s “Detribalised” subject in Sounds of a Cowhide Drum (1971), Sepamla’s pass ‘bearer’ of “To Whom it May Concern” in Hurry up to it! (1975), and Serote’s harassed worker of “City Johannesburg” in his Yakhal’inkomo (1972). This generic ‘he’ – received uncritically from the language of Black Consciousness – is easily recognisable as the classical subject of the West, as MJ Daymond points out in the introduction to South African Feminisms (1996: xlvii). In attempting to construct an alternative black identity and a new black personality our poets do not manage to free their subject from this vicious double bind. The reconstructed ‘he’ is meant to function as an inversion of the negativity attributed to the native Other that has always been the opposition of the Western Subject. However, precisely because it is a simple inversion, the practice of freeing is conceived only within the Manichean assumptions of the Western imaginary.
“Kneel down, woman”: The Mother Africa trope

The trope of Africa as Mother is prevalent within politicised or committed writing by Africa’s (male) authors. Florence Stratton suggests in *African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994) that its origins in modern poetry, for example, can be traced to the work of Lèopold Sèdar Senghor (1994:39). Lurking within male African writing, especially committed writing of the kind we are dealing with here, is the operation of a Manichean allegory defined by the oppositions of male/female and culture/nature. In poetry,

[T]he speaker is invariably male…[t]he addressee is always a woman. She is pure physicality, always beautiful and often naked. He is constituted as a writing subject, a producer of art and of socio-political visions; her status is that of an aesthetic/sexual object. She takes the form either of a young girl, nubile and erotic, or of a fecund nurturing mother. The poetry celebrates his intellect as the same time as it pays tribute to her body, which is frequently associated with the African landscape that is his to explore and discover (1994: 41)

The image of Africa as nurturing Mother has been used in the twentieth century as an attempt to counter colonising representations of Africa as “treacherous…seductive” woman (1994: 39-40). I should note here that traditional European discourse on Africa exhibits a tension between two opposing metaphors. There is the Freudian paranoia of ‘Woman’ as undiscovered (and undiscoverable) country. Here, Africa’s darkness, *her* mystery, is the dominant modality through which the continent is experienced by its colonisers; and the colonising pioneer ‘discovers’, ‘exposes’ and ‘reveals’ *her* to the European mind. On the other hand, there is a considerable tension between this and the Lusophonic myth of Africa – much loved in ‘British’ Southern Africa – as stony, threatening male, Adamastor in his “marble halls”. Here, Africa is “Night, the Negro”
that threatens Roy Campbell while he is “Rounding the Cape”. Against these two equally damaging stereotypes, both the Negritude writers represented by Senghor, and the Black Consciousness poets of Southern Africa, have constructed oppositional images of Africa as neither dark seductress nor violent brute, but as nurturing Mother:

    My mother
    (oh black mothers whose children have departed)
you taught me to wait and to hope
as you have through the disastrous hours…

    Hope is ourselves
your children
travelling towards a faith that feeds life…

    It is ourselves
the hope of life recovered

(Agostinho Neto in English in Africa, 19, 1, 1992).

This ‘progressive’ representation by exclusively male writers has implications for the ways in which these writers build images of women in their work. Here mothering is, as Desiree Lewis has argued, constructed as “a pivotal and extensively supportive activity which co-ordinates acquisitions of selfhood in a patriarchal system influenced by white-centred myths and hierarchical oppositions” (1992: 36). Stephen Gray’s Southern African Literature suggests that Adamastor is the colonising male’s Creation myth of Africa (1979: 15). If so, then ‘Mother Africa’ is the colonised male’s oppositional fantasy of Africa.

    Add to this cultural imperative the terms in which Black Consciousness as a political movement conceived the role of black women in the struggle for liberation, and one has a powerful mix for the production and consolidation of regressive gender stereotypes. The Black Review (1975-76: 143) defined the role of women by stating:

---

6 See Malvern Van Wyk Smith’s anthology Shades of Adamastor, 1988, for varied poetic representations of the life of Adamastor.
1. Black women are basically responsible for the survival and maintenance of their families and largely the socialisation of the youth for the transmission of the black cultural heritage.

2. The need to present a united front and redirect the status of motherhood towards the fulfilment of the black people’s social, cultural, economic and political aspirations (1991: 147-48).

Two things are significantly happening here. The role of women in the movement and in the culture is being defined as ‘bearer’ of the cultural heritage and primary socialiser of men (“youth”) as social actors, and Black Consciousness is also reasserting the preferred role of the woman as ‘mother’. If black men are to have their ‘manhood’ restored to them, the female corollary is to save black ‘motherhood’.

The Black Review’s proscriptions of ‘black’ motherhood demonstrate succinctly the operation of what Stratton (1994) identifies as the two “forms” of the Mother Africa trope. There is the ‘pot of culture’ form (statement one above), where mothering is the socialising reservoir of African culture; and the ‘sweep of history’ form (statement two above), where black/African motherhood serves as an index for the state of the nation. This last form is the representation of motherhood celebrated by Mongane Serote in his “A Poem” (1972: 32). The poem pays homage to artist Dumile’s sculpture of “Mother and Child”. It seems to mourn the oppressive conditions of the lives of black people, but also celebrates the strength and fortitude of black motherhood:

Kneel down woman, naked as you are,
Let your heavy head hang down,
And the milk of your breast
And the weight of your back
Pull you down…(ll.1-5)

Kneel down, woman
We the born shall lie and hide on your back,
While you take a look…(ll. 11-13)

Kneel down, woman, naked as you are.
We are waiting, we want to know. (ll. 17-18)

This poem employs the ‘sweep of history’ form of the Mother Africa trope, with the “heavy” “weight” of woman- and motherhood serving as symbols of the condition of the ‘black nation’. The refrain, moreover, is interestingly very evocative of Leopold Senghor’s own early “Femme noire” (1945), which deploys the trope as sexualised ‘pot of culture’:

Naked woman, black woman
Clothed with your colour which is life, with your form which is beauty!
In your shadow I have grown up; the gentleness of your hands was laid over my eyes.
And now, high up on the sun-baked pass, at the heart of summer, at the heart of noon, I come upon you, my Promised Land.
And your beauty strikes me to the heart like the flash of an eagle (1994: 39).

Here Woman is “Promised Land”, Woman is ‘pot of culture’, Woman is analogised to a bygone culture, conceptualised as immutable, static, conservative, and ahistorical.

The trope, whose operation I am problematising as part of my concern with the politics of representation, elaborates a(n) (unacknowledged) gendered theory of race, of nationhood, and of writing (1994: 51); a theory that excludes women – its objects – from the creative production of identity, the nation, and literary texts. Within its Manicheanism, women are themselves ‘produced’ by male writers as signs and symbols of (male) literary and national vision.

So powerful has been the operation of the ‘Mother Africa’ trope that MJ Daymond (1996: xxvii) suggests that Motherhood as a politicised subject-position has been vital to black women themselves, a fact that has less to do with biological motherhood, than with a patriarchal ‘Mother Africa’ ideal. There is indeed evidence that women have
internalised the trope, and conceive of their political agency from within a paradigm of mothering, as Tom Lodge recounts in *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (1983: 151). The decade that was the height of women’s political action, the 1950s, passed without a significant challenge to prevailing constructions of motherhood and political agency (1996: xxviii), nor were women’s political actions framed within even the most rudimentary proto-feminism.

In the following three chapters I use the theoretical ideas of Gayatri Spivak, bell hooks, and other (South African) women writers to read inscriptions of gender in committed poetry (the ways in which both manhood and womanhood are constructed). I also borrow from Marxian insights on representation to read inscriptions of race (the construction of an oppositional ‘blackness’ by privileged subjects, especially in the poetry of Oswald Mtshali). I use this dual theoretical strategy of re/reading committed poetry in an attempt to deconstruct (in the most neutral possible sense of that word) the oppositional discourse(s) of ‘blackness’ in Black Consciousness writing. As already outlined in the section titled ‘Discipline and Publish’, I have in mind the Foucauldian theoretical elaboration of ‘discipline’ to deconstruct the reception of this oppositional discourse – that is, to unmask and critique the manner in which the educational, critical, and academic establishments work to accommodate, co-opt, neutralise, silence, assimilate, sanitise – in a word, discipline – oppositional discourse.
CHAPTER 2

In 1971 Lionel Abrahams’s Renoster Books published Oswald Mbuyiseli Mtshali’s *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*. Looking at the book in retrospect it is possible and indeed easy to say that it is one of the most successful individual collections of poetry ever published in South Africa. By 1973 sixteen thousand copies had sold in South Africa alone, Oxford University Press had brought out a British edition, and in America Third World Press had reprinted the book with the addition of one extra poem, “Amagoduka at Glencoe Station” (1982: 99-103).

In the original Renoster and the Oxford editions of the book, Nadine Gordimer wrote a foreword that began:

Many people write poetry, but there are few poets in any generation, in any country. There is a new poet in Africa, and his name is Oswald Mbuyiseli Mtshali (1971: v).

This was typical of the unreserved adulation with which much of liberal white South Africa received Mtshali’s poetry. In fact, the entire poetic movement that Mtshali’s book foreshadowed, so-called ‘Soweto’ poetry, was lapped up with such guilty enthusiasm by the white literary establishment that, as commentators like Watson have retrospectively lamented, the very embarrassingly bad was allowed to slip in through the ideological backdoor of Black Consciousness without protest or rigorous examination. However, whereas liberal critics of purist inclination like Stephen Watson have criticized the poetry for its supposed literary shortcomings, in this chapter I will deal with Mtshali’s work on his own terms; that is, to evaluate the extent to which he successfully deals with what I
take to be one of his central leitmotifs: religion, and specifically organized Christianity and its message to the black person as represented by the figure of the poet Mtshali. In an article reprinted in Michael Chapman’s *Soweto Poetry*, Mtshali advanced the view that part of the inspiration for black poetry is to transcend the deceptions of the missionary’s religion:

> Our fears have been compounded by the teachings of missionaries about heaven and hell. Acceptance of the injustices perpetrated on our lives would be rewarded with heavenly bliss, and the opposition of this oppression would lead to perdition…Of course now we have seen through this smokescreen and we have seen the truth (1982: 107).

The extent to which the ‘Soweto’ poets saw “through the smokescreen” and retrieved “the truth” in their poetry is of course not for Mtshali to judge. I believe that some of the more glaring contradictions between what the church teaches to Africans and the everyday injustices perpetrated in the name of Christian ‘civilization’ are well documented and satirised in Mtshali’s poetry. I will also argue, however, that his attempt at a sustained critique is compromised by his own inherited Christianity, that he cannot fully and dispassionately assess the insidious influences of what is, after all, ‘his’ religion. Even in those poems where Mtshali does not deal explicitly with religion, Christianity and Christian symbolism return to haunt the poetry and reduce it, sometimes, to little more than lines of prayer for the deliverance of the African’s soul in the same vein, ironically, in which missionaries had been carrying on for years.

I will argue also that another aspect to be remarked upon in Mtshali’s poetry is what I call the noble failure of a Marxist project. Class and class critique appear quite often in the poems collected in *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*, but are often incomplete and badly conceived, and usually show a compromising preoccupation with the practice of
representation. This practice has the result that the poetry elides – or even actively undercuts – the presence and agency of insurgent and subaltern subjectivity. The term “subaltern” is defined by Gayatri Spivak, following Antonio Gramsci, as the designation for subordinated social groups whose presence and consciousness are problematic for the traditional humanist sovereign subject (1996: 203). The trace of the subaltern presence is there to be read through much of committed poetry. (I will later read subaltern traces in two significant Sepamla poems). The attempt at the representation of subaltern subjects, I believe, defines what is ultimately the most important limit of Sounds of a Cowhide Drum.

Oswald Joseph Mbuyiseli Mtshali was born in Vryheid in KwaZulu-Natal in 1940. After matriculating at the age of eighteen he moved to Johannesburg where he took several jobs, mainly as a messenger. He began writing poetry for publication in 1967, appearing in The Classic, Ophir, New Coin, and Unisa English Studies, among other journals. His first collection Sounds of a Cowhide Drum appeared just four years later, followed by Fireflames (1980).

Before I turn to a reading of Mtshali’s two published collections, it is necessary to return briefly to the question of how Mtshali sees the craft of poetry, and specifically his own historical role as poet of the Black Consciousness epoch. I do this to establish firmly that the poet’s idealist, essentially Christian-inspired misjudgements of his own poetry, cannot be taken very seriously within a Marxist analytical project:

Look upon me as a pullet crawling
From an eggshell
Laid by a Zulu hen
Ready to fly in spirit
To all lands on earth (1971: v)
Following Gordimer’s enthusiastically overblown foreword, this is supposedly the poet’s “manifesto set out...more succinctly than could be expressed in any analysis” (1971: v). This just simply will not do. For the poet who has to obtain a pass from the Native Commissioner to cross the railway track from Alexandra to Sandton, any romantic readiness to fly in spirit to all lands on earth is luxurious nonsense. If this is Mtshali’s “succinct” manifesto, then it is a non-starter. People – poets included – have first to trudge on foot across the railway lines before they may ‘fly’ anywhere. The failure of some of the poetry of the Black Consciousness era – and it was the failure of the Sophiatown writers before them – is rooted in a lack of recognition of this very simple, very material, and very unpoetic fact. It is a lack of recognition deeply rooted in the class and educational positioning of the men who wrote both Sophiatown prose and committed poetry.

Briefly, the intellectual mantle of black life in South Africa before 1976 was borne by men of petit bourgeois inclination, who existed uneasily in the black freehold settlements (Sophiatown) and the townships of black South Africa (Soweto, Alexandra etc), which contained the poorest strata alongside the aspirant men-of-letters like themselves. Educated firmly within a European missionary tradition that taught them that their less fortunate counterparts – the vast majority of Africans – were wretched illiterates, they were nonetheless compelled by the socio-economic ceiling of apartheid to live cheek-by-jowl with the illiterates, whom they began to dramatise, to romanticise, and to poeticise while at the same time defining themselves and their literature as somehow ‘apart’. These men accepted the ideological edifice of Western society, including its Christianity, and could thus not understand, and were hurt by, their continued rejection.
from the white Christian world as its ‘inferiors’. When Mtshali looks upon himself as “a pullet crawling/(l. 1)...ready to fly in spirit/ to all lands on earth” (ll. 4-5), he is expressing the understandably natural desires of this class. It is a desire to maintain his ‘Zuluness’ only as a romantic nationalist departure point that is nonetheless existentially insignificant. By flying in spirit to all lands on earth, he is discarding it for something more universal, discarding its essentially binding African-ness in favour of a global bourgeois solidarity based upon such frivolities as the lyricism of poetry, and the imagined immortality of the bourgeois ‘liberating ideas’. Let us look closer at the meaning of the signifier, ‘Zulu’, in Sounds of a Cowhide Drum. It is a catalogue of physical, tribal props to be found “Inside my Zulu hut” (9):

```
It is a hive
without any bees
to build the walls
with golden bricks of honey.
A cave cluttered
with a millstone,
calabashes of sour milk
claypots of foaming beer
sleeping grass mats
wooden head rests
tanned goat skins
tied with riempies
to wattle rafters
blackened by the smoke
of kneaded cow dung
burning under
the three-legged pot
on the earthen floor
to cook my porridge.
```

Here the material life of the writing subject is a catalogue of Zulu effects. As Gordimer avers, “the liberation of the imagination that makes the writer freeman of the world...is Mtshali’s stylistic and philosophical statement.” It is exactly Mtshali’s “liberation of the
imagination” before any actual material liberation, his bid for the status of “freeman of the world”, that ultimately undermines his critique of the South African reality.

In “Portrait of a Loaf of Bread” (1971: 4), the minutely described process of the making of bread is associated with “Satan’s cauldron” (l. 10). This bread, fashioned in the “red hot” (l. 9) cauldrons of the devil, we find in the next stanza, is to be served to the butter and marmalade-decked table of privilege. The dual messages of Christianity, messages meant respectively for those with bread and those without, are put in direct juxtaposition in the last two stanzas of the poem, with the “food-bedecked breakfast table” (l. 17) steaming with the freshly baked (but, as already suggested, unholy) bread:

Whilst the labourer
With fingers caked with
Wet cement of a builder’s scaffold
Mauls a hunk and a cold drink
And licks his lips and laughs
‘Man can live on bread alone.’ (ll. 18-23)

The serene, culinary picture the poet paints in the second last stanza is suggestive of white privilege, while outside looking in, the black labourer licks his lips and mocks one of the central precepts of Christianity, that ‘man cannot live on bread alone.’ To the labourer, it seems that privileged white South Africa has always been proving the exact opposite, not only living on bread alone but living on all the bread.

Mtshali deals with the theme of material dispossession and economic inequality justified by Christian teaching again in “This Kid is no Goat” (1971: 24). Mtshali’s ‘kid’ is a mission-educated petit bourgeois who is progressively losing his self-delusions that Christianity can protect him against white racism, that “a rosary” may be “clutched as an amulet against/ Slegs vir Blankes – For Whites Only” (ll.16-17). The petit bourgeois
subject, perhaps a Mtshali-type figure, rejects the notion that it is right to suffer material
depprivation now, in return for “heaven when I’m dead” (l. 44):

I want my heaven now,
here on earth in Houghton or Parktown;
a mansion
two cars or more
and smiling servants
Isn’t that heaven? (ll. 45-50)

Through his missionary education and his later enrolment at “Life University” (l. 18) the
bourgeois poet-figure comes to learn: having economically dispossessed and denuded
blacks of their dignity, Christianity attempts to restore to them a semblance of dignity by
promising spiritual reward in some ill-defined Afterlife. It is this deception that the poet
is rejecting, this “smokescreen” that Mtshali has referred to (1982: 107). By demanding a
mansion, two cars and smiling servants, he is expecting what is, after all, promised to him
by his missionary education. He is demanding what is due to him as ‘a man of class’, as
ultimately a Christian himself.

The efficacy of Christianity for material exploitation and maintaining a stable
system of inequality is dealt with again through two other poems: “The Washerwoman’s
Prayer” (1971: 5) and “An Old Man in Church” (1971: 20). In “The Washerwoman’s
Prayer”, the lamenting working-woman (Mtshali’s mother-in-law) is instructed by the
voice of organized religion to “suffer for those who live in gilded sin, / toil for those who
swim in a bowl of pink gin” (ll. 20-21), without any explanation of why she should accept
this fate. The poet uses none of religion’s popular one-line deceptions (‘the meek shall
inherit the earth’, ‘love thy neighbour’, ‘man cannot live…’) to placate the questioning
washerwoman. Instead, in the next stanza:
Thank you Lord! Thank you Lord.  
Never again will I ask  
Why I must carry this task (ll.22-24)

The suggested contempt for the supposed unquestioning gullibility of the working poor is quite arresting. I refer the reader again to Mtshali’s own subject position as a literate member of the educated small bourgeois ‘vanguard’ that viewed itself as the custodians of the struggle; in whose literature and rhetoric the working class appears only as passive non-agents, incapable of questioning the relations of exploitation under which they exist. “The Washerwoman’s Prayer” demonstrates succinctly the impossibility of representation to conceive the agency of the subaltern subject. Popular representations of the African working class and peasantry – both in the literary prose and verse of the bourgeois liberation struggle as well as in the more theoretical documents and papers of the liberation movements – still remain a potentially rich area to be studied.

It is in “An Old Man in Church” that Mtshali reveals himself as fully conversant with the ideological machinations of class exploitation revealed in religious dogma. Mtshali effectively contrasts the life of hard toil under duress, which is the everyday reality of the labourer, with the gilded luxuries of religion’s unreality, where once a week the labourer must necessarily go to “recharge his spiritual batteries”, for if not:

production would stall,  
spoil the master’s high profit estimate  (ll.3-4)

This recharge of spiritual batteries – this ideological allowance for labour to ‘reproduce’ itself – is accomplished with the most invidious of Christianity’s fictions, the old lie:

“Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth” (l. 26)

The poem, to the very end, is ‘rich’ with images of the luxury and financial drain on the poor which religion generally is: “velvet-cushioned pew”(l.7), “gilded communion
plate”(l. 13), “rustling silk vestments”(l. 16), “golden chalice”(l. 17), “brass-coated collection plate”(l. 19), and the “aromatic incense smoke”(l. 23). Contrast these with the hardship and poverty of “the old man”, the rawness of his condition, the anguish in his being, anguish which religion is ultimately not able to soothe: “a machine working at full throttle”(l. 2), “he falls on raw knees”(l. 9), “screams as hard as stones”(l. 11), “slingshot…soul”(l. 12), “gnarled hands”(l. 13), “ears enraptured”(l. 16), “cracked lips”(l. 18), and of course: “the old man sneaks in a cent piece”(l. 20).

As I have said earlier, the use of symbols and metaphors associated with religion reveals Mtshali’s own indebtedness to Christianity and Christian education. Both “An Abandoned Bundle” (1971: 60) and “Keep off the Grass” (1971: 30) attempt to advance a social critique of apartheid-induced social ills through the use of recognisable Christian symbols, the Madonna-and-Child and the ‘hallowed’ piety of religious worship, respectively.

In “The Abandoned Bundle”, the social critique is two-fold, as noted by Mbulelo Mzamane (1985: 355). Firstly, by using strong images of poverty and deprivation, Mtshali takes a condemnatory stance towards apartheid and the degrading social conditions it creates:

The morning mist and chimney smoke of White City Jabavu flowed thick yellow as pus oozing from a gigantic sore.

It smothered our little houses like fish caught in a net (ll. 1-8)
Secondly, Mtshali wants to indict blacks as somehow co-responsible for the growth of social ills and the abandonment of morals. Through the perversion of the Christian symbol of the Immaculate Conception (by its contrast with the ‘tainted conception’ of the abandoned baby), Mtshali wants to point us to the religious unacceptability of the mother’s actions. Mzamane suggests that Mtshali’s Blakean social critique is always advanced by asking the question: is this a holy thing to see? (1985: 356).

In the event I do not believe that such a strategy can succeed. Mtshali’s social critique is one that ignores the fact that the religion upon which it bases itself is implicated in the larger structures of deprivation and degeneration that choke “White City Jabavu” (l.3). Moreover, at a formal level, the poem is undermined and significantly weakened by the introduction of the religious in “Oh Baby in the Manger/ sleep well/ on human dung” (ll.19-21). The romantic vocabulary that follows forces a dampening break with the hard realism of the previous lines:

Its mother
had melted into the rays of the rising sun,
her face glittering with innocence
her heart as pure as untrampled dew. (ll. 22-25)

The pseudo-religious vocabulary of “Keep off the Grass” has a similar effect:

The grass is a green mat
trimmed with gladioli
red like flames in a furnace.
The park bench, hallowed,
holds the loiterer listening
to the chant of the fountain
showering holy water on a congregation
of pigeons. (ll. 1-8)

It is also in this last poem that Mtshali’s difficult ideological relationship to Christianity is inadvertently revealed. Mtshali, the ‘loiterer’ is held listening by the pious teachings of
the church, while ‘Christian’ society, which always keeps him at arms’ length, rejects his advances and instructs him by its various rules and signs to keep off the grass. Ultimately, I believe, it is the poet who “salutes” Christianity with a “hind paw” (l.15), who wants to shame it for its hypocrisy and double-facedness. However, through this very duplicity of religion, through a constant cat-and-mouse game of assimilation and racist rejection, it is the poet and his class of petit bourgeois intellectuals who are left “weeping in anger and shame” (l.16)

I have suggested that Mtshali’s poetry offers meditations on the ‘burden’ of blackness in a racist society. This happens most effectively in the poems that offer no graphic imagery drawn from the everyday reality of that racial burden, nor any attempts to force a metaphor. This is evident in the simplicity, in the everyday mundanity, of “Always a Suspect” (1971: 29):

I get up in the morning
and dress up like a gentleman –
a white shirt a tie and a suit.

I walk into the street
to be met by a man
who tells me “to produce.”

I show him
the document of my existence
to be scrutinized and given the nod.

Then I enter the foyer of a building
to have my way barred by a commissionaire
“What do you want?”

I trudge the city pavements
side by side with “madam”
who shifts her handbag
from my side to the other,
and looks at me with eyes that say
“Ha! Ha! I know who you are;
beneath those fine clothes
ticks the heart of a thief."

However, this very simplicity of description is a hit-and-miss affair. Who but Mtshali has ever observed two chimney sweeps in South Africa, one black and the other white?

I saw
two chimney sweeps
scraping the soot
inside the stack.

They came out
and wiped
their faces
and one said to the other
“İ’m white and
I’ll always be so.
You’re black
You’ll remain so!”

(“Two Chimney-Sweepers”: 38)

What is the force of Mtshali’s class-concerned work and critique? I began by stating that his was a noble Marxist failure. Perhaps, in the context of the developing world, or the conditions created by the post-modernity of the developed world, what is required of a Marxist text is commitment to radical or progressive liberatory politics. Marxist commitment no longer requires an economic theorisation (or no longer requires only an economic theorisation). For how can it, when that very economic and class analysis has been rendered near impossible by the rapid shifts in the means of production in modern capitalism? There are the analytic challenges posed by the growth of middle classes (even collaborative or merely disinterested middle classes among oppressed groups), the consolidation of technological production, the decline in shop-floor organisation, and the devaluation of labour as a productive element in modern capitalism. In such a fraught analytical environment, one remains unconvinced by Mtshali’s
numerous scattered attempts at a representation of the labour/production/exploitation nexus, precisely because of the simplicity with which it flies over the modern challenges to Marxist criticism. Hence I am inclined to view Sound of a Cowhide Drum as rather a noble and honourable failure, a Marxist/socialist/radical project undercut by the pitfalls of representation, the treacherous realities of subject-position, and a dangerously simple Marxism that is dependant for its critical force on a series of representations. It is precisely its failure that makes Sounds of a Cowhide Drum forever amenable to multiple rereadings. Few, after all, are interested in mapping out precisely how and why a particular text is a ‘success’.

Oswald Mtshali’s only other collection of poetry, Fireflames (1980), tends to be less worthy of serious critical attention. I have already questioned the assumptions and value judgements of Stephen Watson, and pointed out that the politics of discipline as they play out in the South African power configuration must always inform the way we read the critical reception of committed poetry. Later I will present a short survey of the literature of reception in which I will situate Watson within the broader politics of the South African critical praxis. It will be an attempt to point to the limits imposed by disciplinary power in practice. However, I should not be read to mean that all (white) criticism is discredited, nor am I suggesting that there is nothing to be salvaged from the critical insights of Watson and others. In fact, I must agree with Watson’s complaint that Mtshali’s 1980 collection “marks a regression on every possible level. It is almost entirely contaminated by hatred” (1990: 83). I would suggest, though, that Mtshali’s problem is exactly the opposite. Fireflames is contaminated by “Love” (1980: 6):

---

It is possible that Mtshali would have improved and refined this shortcoming in his later work. However, Fireflames (1980) regresses and abandons even the putative class politics of Sounds of a Cowhide Drum.
There is a perplexing disease called Love, 
which smites and confuses.  
Whilst the world watches, 
the lovers remain as blind as a mole:  
they take the world  
and make it completely theirs, 
where they enjoy jokes 
and tell funny stories.  

   Love vaults over high mountain tops;  
   it kicks every obstacle on its path;  
   its success brings solace;  
   it reaps the fruits of a blissful life;  
   it burns with unbearable flames.  

Love can dive under the waves,  
without spluttering, without floundering.  
Monsters can howl with horror.  
Love never cares;  
it pushes ahead  
as doggedly as dripping honey. (ll. 1-19) 

“God is Good” (1980: 11) completely regresses from the irony and self-examination of Sounds of a Cowhide Drum. It represents the valorisation of Christian belief and a desire to return to a pure, anti-modern understanding of God that is untouched by technological and scientific reality. Stanza Four, or rather the second chorus of what Mtshali conceives as a song to the Goodness of God, mocks technology as a Western ‘arrogance’ and seems to confuse this with a ‘critique’ of the Western, ‘white’ image of God: 

I hear knuckles rapping on my chest walls,  
vibrating the live wires of my heart,  
and I reject the strange belief  
that God is above the woollen clouds,  
the disappearing presence of moist fantasies  
fanned by the arrogant astronauts  
trying to rip His snowy beard and golden locks;  
they spit into His face.  
His eyes hardly wink,  
when they plunk their feet on the moon-surface. (ll. 20-29)
Even a poem written for his murdered brother Ben (‘This poem is for Ben’: 14), is not, as one might first suppose, conceived in hatred. Rather, the poem presents the spectacle of wounded and angered love:

Some poems are conceived in the womb of pain;  
Others have their gestation in the placenta of hope;  
A few flash through the mirror of the mind in a sweet moment of madness; (ll. 1-4)

This short one is germinated in the seedbed of seething fury, the fury of an endless search – relentless for the truth –  
though no truth will ever alleviate the sorrow at the loss of my brother, Ben. (ll. 7-11)

The immediacy of experience that rendered parts of Sounds of a Cowhide Drum powerful and memorable is lacking throughout much of Fireflames. Irony, specifically the ironic twists of poems like “Boy on a Swing”, “Portrait of a Loaf of Bread”, and “Keep off the Grass”, are all replaced by the gigantic spectacle, the empty metaphor, the cliché of naming:

The Big Grisly Bear brandishes its hammer and sickle claws,  
it flashes its yellow-stained fangs and flicks its gigantic Red sputnik tongue at the ruffled and ailing Eagle,  
whose beak is blunted, whose wings are clipped;  
it casts rueful eyes, above bushels of wheat, at the newly-woven oriental rug,  
a tapestry of fulfilled dreams  
(“The Dawn of a New Era”: 17, ll. 10-18).

Again in “Sorrow” (1980: 23) we get the spectacle of metaphor, this time relying on the supposed shock-effect of the crass sexual image, the anatomical practice of naming:

The happiness of a harlot is felt in the short-lived sensation of a blunted clitoris and the vanquished threads of the vulva;  
the joy of a martyr endures millions of imaginary orgasms,
the blood-drops of a hero outlast the moistness of sperms
which went to procreate the oppressor
whose genes are the kneaded dough
on which all tyrants gorge;
the irascible scoundrels have been let loose;
we must meet their challenge
and ram our breasts against the savage strength,
whether it be napalm bombs or cluster bombs
or the heat-seeking laser guns,
which are made to kill man, woman and child,
but leave intact the edifices of deceit and lies. (ll. 26-40)

A striking feature of Fireflames is the use – one should say the utter misuse – of the symbolism of nature throughout the collection. Whether animals or the rural landscape, Mtshali exhibits an obsession with the sheer physicality of Africa that, ironically, places him in the company of Thomas Pringle and other, later writers of the colonial tradition. In “Weep not for a Warrior” (1980: 24), a warrior “drinks the goat’s blood for bravery / as a willow in a swamp sucks water / to grow stalwart and stay evergreen”(ll.1-3). The “clouds of war gather, / the mountains quiver like broth, / lightning swords the firmament” (ll.21, 23-24). Or, in “Flames of Fury” (1980: 19), blood flows “wider / than the Tugela River in flood, / when it bursts its banks / to drown the laggard locust”(ll.12-15). It is hard to imagine, when one reads these lines, that the actual battle for liberation in South Africa would be fought on the streets of the urban townships and not the banks of the Tugela and Pongola. (The volume is, after all, dedicated to the “brave schoolchildren of Soweto”).

In Fireflames Mtshali attempts to respond to the revolutionary challenge of 1976, and more generally to the identity issues registered by the preceding decade of Black Consciousness. What Stephen Watson criticises, and what he mis-identifies as “the contamination of hatred”, is in fact “the representation of spectacle”, named by Njabulo
Ndebele in his *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (1991) as the conundrum at the heart of black imaginative writing in South Africa: “The history of black South African literature has largely been the history of the representation of spectacle” (1991: 41). It is wrong to call it hatred, but entirely understandable to be dismayed by it. What drives Mtshali through *Fireflames* is the desperate need of the victim to over-represent graphically the spectacular effect of the wound.

The poetry and critique of Oswald Mbuyiseli Mtshali may best be reinterpreted as attempts to dissect a Christian heritage tainted with duality and implicated in the everyday humiliations of black existence in Mtshali’s South Africa. This attempted dissection through aesthetic modes of discourse is not new or original. It uses signs and signifiers within Christian symbolic tropes as an appeal to a universal humanism; and it indicts the poet’s critique as socially limited by revealing his indebtedness to class ideals and humanistic assumptions originating in Christian ideology. I have also pointed out briefly that the educational and materially lowest class of South Africa (the subaltern proper of apartheid/liberation discourse) remains a denigrated, inarticulate presence – or more appropriately the scattered traces of an unrealised presence that is acknowledged only insofar as it swells the numbers to strengthen the liberation struggle of the articulate class (the writers and poets, the representors). The oppressed African does not speak in or through the poetry of Mtshali but is rather represented. It has been my contention in this chapter that the unacknowledged class instinct of Mtshali as educated member of the small bourgeoisie acts as a brake mechanism against a total critique of Christian ideology and the position of the oppressed African in Christian modes of perception.

---

8 It may, in fact, be traced to the poetry of Thomas Pringle.
This ideological brake mechanism pre-empts the aesthetic/poetic positing of a counter-Christian discourse to challenge the space that organized religion designates for the oppressed African within the hierarchy of racial capitalism. It is thus ahistorical and not useful to criticize Mtshali’s aesthetic project as “too timid in [its] condemnation of the white power structure” (Mzamane, 1985: 356) as the later, more ‘revolutionary’ poets were to do. Such Left criticisms are at least as historically limiting as the purely formalist objections of the new liberal Right articulated by Stephen Watson in his “Shock of the Old” (1990). No evaluation of Mtshali’s poetry, whether textual or sociological (and I am confident my own reading has ignored neither textual/formal nor historical/ideological dimensions) can afford to ignore the class and ideological contradictions within that poetry or that subject-position. Evaluative studies that are guilty of this oversight (as most have been) can no longer stand up as worthwhile academic or critically valuable projects.
CHAPTER 3

Mongane Serote’s poetry concerns itself principally with the dual themes of place/belonging on the one hand, and motherhood as metaphor of origins, on the other. Consequently Serote, of the three poets under discussion, is most amenable to an exploration of issues of gender in general, but especially the way in which women and their bodies are represented as sites of signification in committed poetry. This should not be read as a reduction of Serote’s massive output from 1972 to a single, ‘easy’ theme. Nor should it be concluded that I restrict myself to a monothematic treatment of Serote throughout my work.

Certainly a poem like “The Actual Dialogue”, which is the opening poem of his first collection Yakhal’ inkomo (1972), has little that may be seen to address issues of gender explicitly. The poem is a monologue of the powerless subject addressing itself to the explicitly masculine figure of racial authority (“Baas”) in a discursive exchange that has long since ceased to function properly:

Do not fear Baas.
It's just that I appeared
And our faces met
In this black night that’s like me.
Do not fear –
We will always meet
When you do not expect me.
I will appear
In the night that’s black like me.
Do not fear –
Blame your heart
When you fear me –
I will blame my mind
When I fear you
In the night that’s black like me.
Do not fear Baas,
My heart is vast as the sea
And your mind as the earth.
It’s awright Baas,
Do not fear.

(1972: 9)

The irony is that the poem itself is an ‘actual monologue’, a one-way miscommunication structured and regulated by the South African phenomenon of “fear”. The refrain “Do not fear Baas” keeps re-emphasising what we may call the currency of fear in the South African exchange. It addresses the masculine figure of authority while simultaneously undermining the self-assumed power of the white subject in South Africa. Similarly, “City Johannesburg” (1972: 12) is a modern praise poem dealing with the difficulty of belonging experienced by the black subject in South Africa’s white-controlled urban spaces. Here again, the city (Johannesburg) is treated as an explicitly male figure of power, the pass-demanding policeman. Here then is a poem that must be counted as one of the most effective treatments of the theme of place and belonging, but it does not tie this theme explicitly to any notions of femininity or the symbolism of the female anatomy.

I make these brief initial observations and count them as exceptions to the general thrust of my reading of Serote in order to counter any objection which holds that Serote’s poetry is open to a diversity of possible interpretations and thematic discussions. Such diversity is obviously acknowledged. Within the larger context of my own study, however, I would like Serote’s work to serve for a study of gender issues, representations of women, and the symbolic significance of the woman’s body as a site of nurture/site of belonging. It is within this greater context that Mtshali has been interrogated for the
somewhat failed) attempts to interrogate the legacy of Christianity and colonialism, as well as the issues of representation that divide poet and audience. Sepamla, for his part, will be studied for his attempts to foreground language as a spoken medium, thus restoring authenticity to the subject of his poetry as representative of racial power’s oppressed in South Africa.

For much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the supposed difficulties of dealing with the South African landscape was a central theme of white writing in this country. In an alien physical environment dotted with unfamiliar flora and fauna (among the less menacing features), shaped by forces beyond the control and fathom of the (white) writer, it was almost inevitable that place and location would have a crucial symbolic role in the white imaginary.⁹

By contrast, the black writer of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had little cause to be concerned with the practice of literary landscaping. Taking the question of their belonging in South Africa as self-evident, black writers were more concerned with the unfolding of socio-political processes around them, especially the nineteenth century reality of colonialism. Thus, for example, there are none of the descriptive obsessions of Pringle in, say, SEK Mqhayi. Nor have any of the literatures of the indigenous languages produced a descriptive tradition comparable to that which runs, in English, from Pringle to Livingstone. To risk oversimplifying what is a much more complex distinction: while initially white writers preoccupied themselves with the Land, the first generation of black writers were preoccupied with History.

By the conclusion of the Second World War however, much of this had changed. The white imagination no longer concerned itself overwhelmingly with the question of who owned the Land. In post-industrialisation South Africa, the Land had in any case lost its symbolic significance. A white ruling class was firmly in control of the country, and was (at least for a time) confident of its ownership and, therefore, belonging. At the tip of the African continent, this small ruling class had built (or boasted to itself that it had built) a modern, industrialised and urbanised country fashioned in the image of Europe. As for ownership and belonging in this ‘new’, emergent South Africa, the burden of proof, as it were, had shifted by the 1950s to the black writer. At least in English, the white writer had been writing for some time within a securely urban imaginary. To be white and English no longer meant being alienated from a harsh landscape with few words in the language able to account for it; it meant, rather, being urban and sophisticated. To be black, however, no longer meant ancient roots in the land; it meant alienation in the slums and townships of the new state.

The black writers of post-World War Two South Africa faced a dilemma similar to that of their white compatriots of fifty years before: existence and survival in a physical landscape shaped by forces beyond their control or fathom. And since by the time of the emergence of the first Soweto poets the Apartheid state had declared war on the black presence in South Africa’s cities, ‘survival’ became indeed the operative word in the lives of many blacks. As the first bulldozers moved on Sophiatown in 1955, the challenge was laid at the door of black writers to assert that they and their kind belonged in this new, urban South Africa. The celebration and the evocation of ‘place’ became more and more

---

10 See Lodge, 1983; and Beinart’s *Twentieth Century South Africa*, 1994; for a fuller treatment of black struggles for ownership and belonging in newly industrial South Africa.
a feature of black writing. More often than not, though, ‘place’ elicited a cry of anguish
more than a celebration. From Bloke Modisane’s bitterly angry denunciations of the
destruction of Sophiatown in Blame me on History (1986), to Can Themba’s mock ironic
evocations of its social and intellectual milieu in The Will to Die (1972), the mapping of
the urban space in black literature has developed as a political statement of defiance.
And with the demise of prose after the Sharpeville (1960) clampdown, it fell to the more
‘immediate’ medium of poetry to confront the difficulties of ‘place’ and belonging in
South Africa’s urban spaces.

I think history will show that of all the poets to emerge from the post-Sharpeville
era, the one who most fully and consistently picked up the gauntlet was Mongane Serote.
Poems like “City Johannesburg”, “Morning Walk”, and the “Alexandra” poems in one
way or the other negotiate the subject’s place within an urban, alienating, and often
hostile physical and political landscape. Moreover, Serote most explicitly inherited
Modisane’s usage of the township (Sophiatown for Modisane, Alexandra for Serote) as
metaphor for the self.

The poem “City Johannesburg” may be read as a modern adaptation of the
traditional praise poem. It is Serote’s first enactment of the celebration (or lamentation)
of ‘place’ that I have suggested characterises much of black South African literature of
the latter twentieth century. Both Serote’s first two collections, Yakhal’ inkomo (1972)
and Tsetlo (1974) may in fact be seen as ways of dealing with the city Johannesburg and,
especially, Alexandra; largely through the modernised and adapted (and quite often
inverted) form of the African praise poem. “City Johannesburg” (1972: 12) even opens
with the self-reflexivity and repetitions of the traditional praise poem:
This way I salute you:
My hand pulses to my back trousers pocket
Or into my inner jacket pocket
For my pass, my life,
Jo’burg City. (ll. 1-5)

The allusion to the frantic physical motion (“My hand pulses to my back trousers pocket/Or into my inner jacket pocket”) calls to mind the boisterous nature of praise performance. Here, however, the subject (the praise-singer to Johannesburg) is a harassed, hungry figure whose pulsating movements are driven not by festive gyrations, but by fear.11 This imposing Johannesburg, with its “thick iron breath”(l.21), its “electrical wind” and “neon flowers” (l.25), and its “cement trees”(l.29), is not a figure to be admired. It bears no resemblance to the visiting dignitary, the commanding bull, the Chief’s ancestors or the King’s Great Place, the beloved woman, or any of the other traditional inspirations and objects of praise poetry. It inspires only fear, weakness, and intimidation. And when it is done with the subject, or more properly, his labour, it spits all out to the surrounding townships of dongas and dust:

I can feel your roots, anchoring your might, my feebleness
In my flesh, in my mind, in my blood,
And everything about you says it,
That, that is all you need of me.
Jo’burg City, Johannesburg,
Listen when I tell you,
There is no fun, nothing, in it
When you leave the women and men with such frozen expressions,
Expressions that have tears like furrows of soil erosion,
Jo’burg City, you are dry like death,
Jo’burg City, Johannesburg, Jo’burg City. (ll. 33-44)

11 I have already touched on the motif of fear as a characteristic of the South African discursive exchange in my brief discussion of “The Actual Dialogue”.

61
This poem, like later ones centred on the difficulties of ‘place’ and belonging, draws a sharp distinction between cold, hostile Johannesburg made of cement and neon, on the one hand, and Alexandra made of dust, dongo and people, on the other. It is Alexandra with whom the poet has a love-hate relationship of belonging: “my love, / My comic houses and people, my dongs and my ever / whirling dust, / My death/ That’s so related to me as a wink to the eye” (ll.14-18).

The metaphor of Alexandra as first love, as Mother, is most explicitly pursued in the first poem that bears the name of the township:

```
Were it possible to say,
Mother, I have seen more beautiful mothers,
A most loving mother,
And tell her there I will go,
Alexandra, I would have long gone from you (ll. 1-5)
```


Imperfect, non-nurturing, even perverse mother that Alexandra is, there just is no replacing her with anything else:

```
But we have one mother, none can replace,
Just as we have no choice to be born,
We can’t choose mothers;
We fall out of them like we fall out of life to death. (ll. 6-9)
```

But this commonsense observation about our lack of choice in mothers is less prosaic and mundane than it first appears. While it is only nature and the various accidents of birth that allow no choice in who one’s mother is, there is no accident in being black and living in Alexandra. It is the political condition of being black in South Africa that gives the subject no choice but to ‘belong’ to Alexandra and all other battered, bruised ‘Mother’-townships like it.
But “Alexandra” is more than just an indictment of the political conditions that create township life. The poem also anticipates, and probes, much of the myth-making that would later form a crucial part of writing within a Black Consciousness mode. For if Alexandra can also be held accountable for the lives, and death, of her children (“You are bloody cruel”, l.28), what place is there in the imagination for a maternal, nurturing Africa? It is possible for Alexandra to be both a place of protected comfort on the one hand, even a soaring bird on whose wings her children might rise; and on the other, a scarred and bruised place of sorrow and disappointment. Often such transformations of image and symbolism happen in different poems within a single collection, or even within the same poem. “Amen! Alexandra”, from the collection Tsetlo (1974: 14), captures this ambiguity:

Alexandra,
i. and many others who know you,
we who have seen you firm on your feet
like the earth
your back soaking the chilly winds and rains,
and we stood beneath your wings (ll. 1-6)

The poem then reveals the tension associated with the myriad images and symbols contained in the name ‘Alexandra’:

and Alexandra you are a thunder clap,
that froze in our hearts
like a moment which becomes a cruel memory,
now that you form clouds of dust in the sky,
above roars of a bulldozer (ll.12-16)

Often this “cruel memory”, rather than being so eloquently articulated as it is here and in Yakhal’ inkomo, is allowed to articulate itself in a simple but evocative process of naming:

I
picked pieces of my broken heart early one morning
from the ceiling
and pillow
while I lay
thinking
feeling
so
low like a man his head below
trying hard to creep beneath a sagged low barb wire
which wove his soul
hanging
in Cape Town. Durban. Swaziland. Alex-
andra’s
head has been chopped off (ll. 1-19)
(“Mode of Broken Pieces”, 1974: 27)

The broken words, the enjambment, and the techniques of punctuation allow the poem to proceed much like a memory indeed would. And often the “memory” is a litany of symbolic names associated with an entire history of forced removal, dispossession, urban ghettos, and social exclusion in ‘designated’ townships (or ‘group areas’):

in Alex-
andra
Dis-
trict
6
chatsworth and black east west south and north
i picked the pie-
ces
of my bro-
ken hea
rt
below a ‘civilised progress’ (ll. 164-175)

In “Morning Walk” (1972: 14) the poet-figure is once again confronted in a very personal way by the impersonal hustle and bustle, and by the potential for the easy, savage violence of Alexandra. In ways reminiscent of Mtshali’s “An Abandoned Bundle”, the
The opening lines suggest alienation for the speaking subject, who is walking in the opposite direction to that of the people. Michael Chapman, in *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective*, (1984: 198) has pointed out that “the people” about whom the Black Consciousness poets wrote are mostly a literary construct, as the poets themselves would share nothing by way of class and social status with the majority of African people in the townships. There is in “Morning Walk” a suggested isolation of the speaking subject that results from his profession as a writer. The lines also contain a subtle critique of the living conditions of the “crowds of people”, who have to go “up” where they work (presumably climbing the capitalist colossus of “City Johannesburg”), but “down” where they stay (in the dongas and dust of “Alexandra”). The conflict with a dog that follows produces in him a violent reaction similar to Mtshali’s Christian-humanist persona of “An Abandoned Bundle”:

And then I saw a black dog come; its mouth aimed at my ankle,
I kicked!
And I saw it high, too high, above the ground,
And it banged back on the ground,
It cried movingly. (ll. 12-17)

Here, however, the reaction of violence is prompted by no altruistic concern for a squirming infant, but in order to protect “[his] ankle” against what turns out to be “just a puppy”, not Mtshali’s scavenging dogs. What is more, this subject’s feelings of regret and penitence at having hurt the dog last only for a short while. A figure not overburdened with the moral musings that characterize the last lines of “An Abandoned Bundle”, any feelings of remorse and sympathy for the puppy are soon subsumed by the sudden resurfacing of anger (“I raged and I swore”, l.22), after which life continues at its brisk township pace:

We did not stop to talk
I walked on to end my morning walk… (ll. 27-28)

A major theme of the work of Serote’s work is the symbolic place of women, or more specifically motherhood. This is especially marked in his later long poems, as this body of work was more recognisably marked by the prevailing ideas of Black Consciousness, which tended to see the role of women in the struggle for liberation largely in terms of nurturing and supporting sons and husbands. Behold Mama, Flowers, for instance, was published in 1978, after the turning point of liberation politics in the Soweto uprising of 1976. The poem is a long monologue addressed to the African ‘mother’ by one of her children. Coming as it does at the close of what may be called the ‘decade of affirmation’, Behold Mama, Flowers eschews much of the ambiguity and difficult belonging of the earlier Alexandra poems. Here Africa’s suffering induces no defeat or surrender or long-suffering resignation, but dignity and the threat of the coming conflagration:

i can say
your dignity is locked in the resting places
in the places where you shall drink water
around the fire where you shall laugh with your children
i can say otherwise
your dignity is held tight in the sweating cold hands
    of death
the village where everything is silent about dignities
i will say again
behold the flowers, they begin to bloom!

(1978: 61)

Here, and in the earlier No Baby Must Weep (1975), Serote utilises not only the Black Consciousness-inspired motif of ‘African mother’, but also symbols of birth and regeneration. This, in Behold Mama, Flowers, portends the threat of Africa rising to free itself, and is a particularly Black Consciousness gesture of political commitment. In No Baby Must Weep the effect is the re-interpretation and re-examination of Africa’s history of adversity from a particularly personal vantage point. Here again, as in “A Poem” (1972: 32), Serote employs the ‘sweep of history’ trope of the mother identified by Florence Stratton (1994: 41), this time to situate his subject in a claim of belonging. He places the individual consciousness at the centre of the African historical process. The subject of No Baby Must Weep retraces the footsteps of his life, eventually to his birth and his origins in the womb:

this is my kingdom which is ruled by the whistle that tears
into the dark
like a sharp blade through a piece of cloth
here i used to criss-cross the street from yard to yard
below the fences which now and then teethed my trousers
or shirt as if to admonish me
that is what i thought
because as i crept beneath the fences and darkness
i could feel your huge eye glittering, twinkling through my
street secrets
in moments when i pinned a little girl into a wrecked automobile
and I groped her body and found out how i came to this
The subject re-interprets his youth and childhood in the attempt to place himself within the greater context of the history of the African continent (the “black mother”). Here African history is linked to the female reproductive role in the process of nation-building.

The desolate landscape through which the subject walks with his mother is at points clearly recognisable as the physical landscape of the South African township, perhaps even Alexandra. From the “wrecked automobile” inside which the persona retraces his path into the world, to the ubiquitous advertising boards of foreign corporations, the landscape of the township is prominent as a political statement of Africa’s socio-economic conditions:

that shop veranda that you now see
with bricks long baked in the sun and in the wind and
in the rain
looking as if any minute pus might spill out of them,
that shop there
with pillars no longer standing high and fat like a merchant
but crooked and weary like an old ill woman
and the miriam makeba pepsi cola advert saying drink
pepsi cola
that closed door, those now sealed windows
looking like gagged mouths and blindfolded eyes
there is my one-time kingdom

And, later:

alexandra
will I then be able to fight outside my house
things there are littered around
this car
with doors torn and its body folded like this
has stains of my blood on its seats and floor and bonnet
children play in it now
Moreover, motherhood, in *No Baby Must Weep* and later poems, is devoid of the irony and disappointing twists of the first "Alexandra" poems. Perhaps working under the political climate of the later 1970s, *No Baby Must Weep* eschews the rigorous self-examination of the earlier poems and accepts whole-heartedly the myth-making of much of Black Consciousness philosophy and writing. It places itself unambiguously within that mode of thinking about Africa, and, as Michael Chapman has written, mobilises "rhetoric" and "convey[s] the impression that [it] imparts [a] message of consciousness-raising and race-pride to a black communal audience in the first instance" (1984: 195). Thus we move from the uncertainty, ambiguity, difficult belonging and flawed mother of the first "Alexandra" in:

*Alexandra often I've cried.*
*When I was thirsty my tongue tasted dust,*
*Dust burdening your nipples.*
*I cry Alexandra when I am thirsty.* (ll. 15-18)

(Yakhal’ inkomo, 1972: 22)

to the sure, adulatory, and “consciounss-raising” tones contained in:

*but mama, you in your hope as fat as your breast*
*fed me with the mild milk*
*you put me on your lap of hope*
*me a load on your back*

(Selected Poems, 1982: 85).

This, in earlier Serote, is reminiscent of “A Poem” (saluting “Mother and Child” sculpture by Dumile) more than “Alexandra”. Celebrating the resilient strength of woman pulled down by the very condition of womanhood, the poem anticipates *No Baby Must Weep* and Serote’s later linking of race-consciousness with ‘woman-’, specifically ‘mother’-hood:

*Kneel down woman, naked as you are,*
*Let your heavy head hand down,*
And the milk of your breast
And the weight of your back
Pull you down;
Take a look at the thighs
And see.
The world that God wrote with his big fingers,
Were they hesitant fingers?
They wrote a story we live but do not understand.
Kneel down, woman,
We the born shall lie and hide on your back,
While you take a look.
The truth is that you are seeing an arrangement,
There’s water, is it salty? There’s blood,
That is salty.
Kneel down, woman, naked as you are.
We are waiting, we want to know. (1972: 32)

Serote, more than the other two poets, inherited the concern with ‘place’ that had characterised the ‘Sophiatown’ generation of writers. In Serote’s poetry the physical setting usually becomes a highly fraught political contestation centred on issues of belonging in the politically charged physical space that is the South African township. This is what Es’kia Mphahlele, in Race and Literature (1987), called the “tyranny of place” in black South African letters. Usually the name ‘Alexandra’ serves as a sign for the social condition of, firstly, dispossession and the difficult living conditions for black people and, secondly, the claims of belonging as reaction to these dehumanising living conditions.

The motif of ‘mother/motherhood’ in Serote is linked specifically to the poet’s own roots in Alexandra. His poetry interrogates the relationship between ‘mother’ and child, often with an unusual degree of self-reflexivity and self-examination. In countless poems, from the salute to “Mother and Child” to be found in Yakhal’ inkomo (1972), to the longer No Baby Must Weep (1975) and later Behold, Mama, Flowers (1978), motherhood serves as a powerful tool of consciousness-raising, with recurrent motifs and
images of resilience, rebirth, and secure origins. However a different form of motherhood emerges in the “Alexandra” poems, where ambiguity and difficulties of belonging express themselves. There the woman’s body serves not as symbol of birth, new beginnings and an Africa always renewing itself, but rather as a site of violation, barrenness, and failed motherhood. ‘Mother’ becomes a cursed appellation, not a badge of honour. It is probable that this shift from the type of motherhood we see in the early “Alexandra” poems to that of Behold, Mama, Flowers is explicable as a reaction to the political exigencies of the late 1970s moment, especially the impulse of Black Consciousness towards affirmation of all things African, beginning with black motherhood.
A poetry impure as a suit of clothes, as a body soiled with food...ravaged by the labour of our hands as by an acid, saturated with sweat and smoke, a poetry that smells of urine and white lilies – Pablo Neruda

CHAPTER 4

Sidney Sipho Sepamla is the last of our poets and the oldest of the four (with Oswald Mbuyiseli Mtshali, Mafika Pascal Gwala, and Mongane Wally Serote) usually cited as representative of what was termed the ‘Soweto poetry’ of the 1970s. I will argue that his poetry, perhaps more so than that of his colleagues, undoubtedly introduced a new urgency and a new voice into South African English literature around the time of the rise of Black Consciousness as a cultural and philosophical movement, and is most successful in engendering an alternative oppositional and insurgent discourse. The poetry of the new black writers of the time attempted to assimilate the discourse of blackness throughout the 1970s into literary forms of black cultural affirmation, though none of the linguistic terms and implications of ‘blackness’ were ever fully developed with sufficient depth in their writings.

Perhaps it was the failure of the Black Consciousness-committed poets to theorize and sufficiently conceptualise such terms as ‘black’, the ‘black experience’, and ‘resistance’ that has led sceptical commentators like Stephen Watson to bemoan the “intellectual poverty” of black poetry from the 1970s:

[I]t now seems increasingly difficult to see how it could ever have been believed that a poetry that was based largely on the notion that ‘black is beautiful’ and ‘white is ugly’ could ever have amounted to very much. No literature...could long be sustained by such intrinsically threadbare notions as ‘blackness’ or ‘black experience’ and a determination...to reject all...white culture...as the work of the devil” (1990: 84-5).
Though I do not fault Watson’s dismay at the lack of theoretical rigour of the ‘Soweto’ poets, I do not believe that their lack of intellectual rigour is the result of ‘poverty’. Nor am I convinced by a criticism that leaps from a disapproving evaluation of the committed poets to the rather presumptuous conclusion that notions of ‘blackness’ are, in themselves, “threadbare” and represent a “stupefying intellectual poverty”(1990: 85), which disqualifies them as sustenance for any enduring literature. I am also not willing to defend committed poetry against Watson as a dialectical transcendence of the ‘literature of protest’ towards a more progressive ‘literature of resistance’.12 Firstly, I believe that notions of ‘protest’ and ‘resistance’ were never themselves sufficiently theorized as to be useful for any sociological evaluation. Secondly, the essentialist historicism inherent in these terms ultimately clouds rather than clarifies the contribution of committed poetry to black cultural affirmation (especially that of Sepamla). Finally and most importantly, the historical evidence of the development of black poetry in the century defeats all notions of a neat chronological movement from ‘protest’ (liberal-humanist) to ‘resistance’ (Black Consciousness-inspired).

Rather, I am arguing that the black poets as a whole, but most especially Sipho Sepamla, frustrate the essentially West-centric critic through the inaccessibility of their language in all the poems that are relevant to an understanding of ‘black experience’. I have already indicated that Sepamla’s work presents the reader with unique opportunities for the retrieval of the subaltern and insurgent voice. The three poems I would most like to concentrate on for a retrieval of the presence of unrepresentable subjects, “Dear Lovely” and “To Whom It May Concern” from Hurry up to it! (1975), and “Statement:

The Dodger” from The Blues is You in Me (1976), when read closely, are what I call statements of unrepresentable blackness. They all eschew the practice of representation that can sometimes be observed at work in the poetry of Oswald Mtshali. For example, “Statement: The Dodger” presents the life of a working class township storyteller in his own language by the use of a fast-paced and grammatically irreducible hybrid of English and township Xhosa. “Dear Lovely” is a humorous courtship lyric beyond township class barriers, rendered in the uneducated but hyperbolic speech of the suitor. The poem manages to encompass a subtle yet powerful re-writing of the colonial enterprise. “To Whom It May Concern” is a statement of officialdom in the terse, clerical tones of apartheid bureaucracy, which simultaneously undermines the power of that bureaucracy by the insertion of the insurgent voice into the document of power. Each of the three poems, in its own way, conjures up images and identifications of class and race far beyond what may be said by the words themselves. Any critical complaint which imprisons itself at the level of words (either because they are ‘intellectually poor’ or ‘revolutionarily timid’) risks missing out on the imaginatively rich level of identification and recognition which Sepamla’s poems allow to the reader.

In this chapter I will defend a position that sees Sepamla as the most accomplished of the three poets being studied. My reading retrieves in Sepamla the multiple dimensions of the role of language – especially as a spoken medium – in the constitution of subjects. Sepamla’s work lives up to Michael Chapman’s claim that committed black poetry “made its rejection of mainstream Western literary and cultural continuities almost a moral and stylistic imperative” (1984: 197). Yet I will argue that it does so in ways that are sophisticated enough, and of such encompassing historical vision, that they have
managed to escape the attentions of many critics. This is a position in conscious
disagreement with Chapman’s assertion that “[Sepamla] lacked the verbal intensity of
Serote and the vividness of Mtshali” (1984: 224). “The law that says”, from Sepamla’s
second collection The Blues is You in Me (1976: 63), sets out precisely this rejection of
literary continuities that Chapman identifies, and the poem foregrounds language as the
poet’s manifesto:

The law that says
claws the flesh
leaving imprints
that scar my habit to do

The law that says
constricts the breath-line
causing a gasping
that bends the lie I let out (ll. 1-8)

Sepamla may to some extent also be defended against the legitimate view that the class
position of the poet closes all possibilities of identification with the archetypal township
subject of his poetry, resulting in texts of representation rather than the subject as the
lived experiences of the poet. This is an accusation that I have levelled against the poetry
of Oswald Mtshali in particular, in Chapter One of this dissertation.

Throughout the chapter, as is true of the dissertation as a whole, I use the term black
poet/ry or ‘committed poetry’ as far as possible, in a conscious avoidance of ‘Soweto’
poet/ry, an unfortunate terminology inaugurated and defended by Michael Chapman
(1984: 183-4). Wherever I am forced to use the term ‘Soweto’, both in this chapter and
elsewhere, I have chosen to highlight its usage in an attempt to problematize the careless
designation of this poetry as ‘Sowetan’ or essentially township-regarding. This is a kind
of ghettorization, I believe, that has not been applied to ‘white’ poetry. To my limited
knowledge there has not been any popular reference to ‘Sandton poetry’, even as the
commonalities of idiom within much of middle-class, white suburban poetry are
acknowledged. This is undoubtedly the result of an intellectual arrogance which sees
anything black or relating to blacks as somehow outside of the ‘mainstream’ – and this,
disturbingly, in a country whose population is 90% black.

Before I analyse “To Whom It May Concern”, I will re-emphasise the point that
Sepamla, almost alone among the committed poets, is concerned with the uses of
language in the constitution of people as subjects. His strongest poems, including each of
the ones that I will deal with in this chapter, unequivocally foreground either spoken
language or the written (usually official) document. His occupation with language is
usually expressed through the use of a number of recognisable strategies. The first of
these is the use of the documental language of power for a usually ironic critique of the
language and practice of power. In these poems, prime examples of which are “To
Whom It May Concern” (1975: 9) and “The Applicant” (1975: 26), the insurgent
presence of the oppressed subject mocks or destabilises the language of power. In “The
Applicant”, apartheid officialdom and its paranoia come in for criticism using apartheid’s
own language, laws, and bureaucratic practices:

Ja Meneer I qualify
I was born in a Reserve
Sometimes called a Location
Or an area of sorts
For a certain type of person
Received inoculations at six months
To minimize contamination
By yellow-fever and red-pox
At least until the age of 16

Ja Meneer I admit
There’s a fair spread
Almost epidemic, I’d say
Of our special kind of red-pox
For which blame lies squarely
On unpatriotic elements
And/or overseas influences
Coming in as they do
Through the improved Jan Smuts Airport…(ll. 1-18)

Here the speaking subject is very similar to the ‘bearer’ of “To Whom It May Concern”, with the significant difference that “The Applicant” is an ironically articulate subject, able to mock the racial paranoia of the apartheid state, as well as its anti-Communist phobia (both “yellow-fever” and “red-pox” from overseas are very suggestive in this regard).

The second language-strategy that Sepamla uses, evident in poems like “Come Duze Baby” (1975: 21), “My Name Is” (1975: 44) and “Statement: The Dodger” (1976: 28), is the use of language to identify the speaking subject with a greater community of blacks by deploying untranslated and often untranslateable Xhosa or Tsotsitaal. In “My Name Is” the practice of name-giving in identifying and therefore constructing black people is challenged with an aggressive and oppositional self-naming:

Modidi waSeshego
Qaba laseCofimvaba
Say my name is:
Makhonatsohle or
Mayenzwintando yakhonkosi…(ll. 17-21)

John is neither here nor there
Mary lives no more for tea only!

Xoxo elixhaphisa
AmaXhwili aseRawutini (ll. 27-30)
Lastly, in poems like “The Bookshop” (1975: 13) and “Dear Lovely” (1975: 64), the broken and bastardised English spoken by the subject ridicules the pretences of the missionary-educational enterprise in Africa, and by extension colonialism in its entirety. More than anywhere else, it is here that Sepamla engages in what Jeremy Cronin’s essay, “South African English-language Poetry Written by Africans in the 1970s” (1985), identifies as the practice of “nationalising a colonial language” (1985: 26). In drawing attention to the imperfections of taught language, these poems also turn scrutiny and criticism inward towards the production and consumption of poetry itself. The self-effacing speaker of “The Bookshop” confronts a similar dilemma to that of Oswald Mtshali’s well-dressed city worker of “Always a Suspect” (1971: 29). Both are subjected to racist suspicion, with the subtle yet crucial difference being that Sepamla’s subject does not dwell too long on the spectacle of racial effrontery:

Here I is
Too literate to reads comics and the Bible
I walks into a bookshop a newspaper in one armpit
I spots my favourite magazines
Fortune, Esquire, Times, New Yorker, etc.
They are priced beyond my likes
I doesn’t care that much
Like others I flip through
Here and here my eye catch something to reads
I proceeds…(ll.1-10)

I was lapping up some pages
Same as a dog do
‘Strue’s living God…(ll.13-15)

Suddenly I hear: ‘Excuse me please?’
Strangers leave me dumb
I sees this one grab my newspapers
‘Can I see what you have there?’
‘Sure! I never had anything to hide!’
Not a moment later: ‘Excuse me but
One lady inside said you had taken all sorts of things.’
‘Not the first time!’ I answers
And I proceeds. (ll.30-38)

Mbulelo Mzamane (1992: 358) sees “To Whom It May Concern” (1975: 9), along with other early poems of Sepamla’s such as “The Will” (1975: 23) and “Hurry Up To It” (1975: 69), as raising issues of “deprivation and compartmentalization [and] gain[ing] their effect through the poet’s ability to distance himself from his subject matter in order to see all the absurd angles.” Though I appreciate that this may particularly seem true of “To Whom It May Concern” because of the nature of its poetic statement, I would caution that to extend the reading of ‘distance’ to other poems of Sepamla’s would be to miss one of the abiding strengths of his work. As I have said earlier, Sepamla is different from Mtshali and other committed poets primarily because of the closeness of identification that he is able to generate with the subject matter, and indeed with the Subject, of his poetry. I will return to this point in a later discussion of “Dear Lovely” and “Statement: The Dodger”.

Bearer
Bare of everything but particulars
Is a Bantu (ll. 1-3)

In the very opening statement of “To Whom It May Concern” the subject of its statement has already been denuded of humanity and every characteristic that may identify him/her as a separate and recognizable individual. The subject is but a “Bearer”, a term which does not infer humanity on the subject. Oxen, after all, ‘bear’ yokes (and Sepamla’s subject ‘bears’ a racial burden). The subject is also, significantly, ungendered. “Bearer” is “a Bantu”, possibly a man, possibly a woman, but definitely a pass carrier (he/she is “Bare of everything but particulars”). Through the rest of the poem the gendered pronoun (he/his) recurs only as a generic term rather than a gender-specific identification.
It is, in any case, unheard of for a Black Consciousness poet to write “She lives”. The subject, as I have argued, is always unquestionably masculine. “To Whom It May Concern” is a statement of the conditions of black life, in other words the “particulars” to which the Bearer is “subject”: the Urban Natives Act (1925) and its amendments, the Abolition of Passes Act, the Group Areas Act (“He may roam freely within a prescribed area”, l.14) and other racial humiliations of apartheid legislation. By describing the legislative dimensions of black life under apartheid, Sepamla traces the origins of the modern apartheid state to the English/Afrikaner Pact government of the mid-1920s. He ties this in neatly with the more contemporary and insidiously named Abolition of Passes and Consolidation of Documents Act. And in between these legislative landmarks of exclusion and restriction, there is nothing but a morass of “anxiety” and “conscription”(l.15).

Michael Chapman has written that Sepamla’s poem owes a debt to W.H. Auden’s “The Unknown Citizen” without necessarily being derivative (1984: 224). The ‘universal’ in Sepamla’s poem is apparent in lines like these:

Bearer’s designation is Reference number 417181…
The remains of R/N 417181
Will be laid to rest in peace…(l. 19, ll. 27-28)

In which bureaucracy in the world are human lives not expressed as numbers, whether for Social Security, Unemployment Benefits, or population statistics? But the ‘universals’ of Sepamla’s poem are quickly subsumed under the immediate weight of apartheid compartmentalization:

On a plot
Set aside for Methodist Xhosas…
In anticipation of any faction fight…(ll. 29-30, l. 33)
To reiterate, I think it would be a mistake to see distance from the subject matter as one of the strengths of this poem. The essence of the poem as a bureaucratic statement necessitates a distance from the ‘subject of poetry’ (in this case the absent and silenced “Bearer”), but it does not necessarily lead to artistic distance from the subject matter. I would argue that the subject matter of “To Whom It May Concern” is the condition of the subject’s oppression by legislative fiat, a condition to which Sepamla maintains sympathetic proximity through the use of a language that is at once emotive as it is clerical. For instance, the poet commits himself to the subject matter in the very last statement of the poem, where he allows the very emotive invocation of “the Day of Judgement” (l.34) to serve as apocalyptic metaphor for the coming political reckoning. Such statements of commitment tend to break down the supposed distance between the poet and his subject matter. The evocation of this apocalyptic tone, as well the inclusion of the line “He lives”, functions to undermine the confident and even arrogant tone of power in the rest of the ‘official document’:

Subject to these particulars
He lives
Subject to the provisions
Of the Urban Natives Act of 1925 (ll. 7-10)

Sandwiched between particulars and provisions, the subject – and here the word functions in its repressive, ‘negative’ sense – nevertheless “lives”. The statement of the subaltern presence is subtle and even obscure, but is all the more powerful for being expressed in the very language that seeks to suppress it.

“Dear Lovely” (1975: 64) is a township lyric of love across class barriers. It is a strident refusal to offer “apologies to be poor” (l.11). The language is simple and naïve, and in this simplicity and naïveté lies its effectiveness. Earlier I argued that the subaltern
of apartheid/liberation discourse has not been allowed to speak directly through the poetry of Mtshali, but has rather been spoken for in condescending and often disparaging tones. In contrast Sepamla gives voice to the voiceless by the use of linguistic conglomerations that are common to township life. In poems like “Dear Lovely” and “Statement: The Dodger”, in fact, Sepamla does not use English at all, but rather employs a postcolonial ‘english’ which rescues the poet from the pitfalls of representation which are often the artistic and political brakes on Mtshali’s poetry.

My heart cough little bit
Minute I touch touch for you
This here and that there
Oh my mostest beautifullest

How I was being born
And you was born or coming front or back
Just the devil can know
Oh my number one thing (ll. 1-8)

The use of the grammatically incorrect elliptical jump in “My heart cough little bit” immediately awakens our awareness to the speaking subject of Sepamla’s poem. Throughout the poem Sepamla’s language is agrammatical and unsophisticated. It is the language of the uneducated township suitor, eager to impress. Sepamla also evokes a cultural era that is open only to a certain kind of assumed reader (a kind which, for better or worse, excludes the majority of South African critics). The line “minute I touch touch for you” is translatable into Xhosa as “phatha-phatha”, the popular township dance of the 1950s and 1960s, made famous by Miriam Makeba’s song “Phatha-Phatha”. The evocation of phatha-phatha and the cultural atmosphere in which it flourished in long-gone townships like as Sophiatown aids the process of class and cultural identification that I have highlighted as the major strength of Sepamla’s poetry. Because the poet has
steadfastly refused to speak on behalf of the subject, he has ensured his own as well as the reader’s identification with the subject. What may have been, in the hands of Mtshali, a text of representation, becomes one of identification: the life of the subject is presented and received as the lived experience of both poet and reader.

But you must listen here:
Is one thing I never ask it:
Apologies to be poor (ll. 9-11)

While the speaking subject is proud of his articulateness as well as his class position – he does not offer “apologies to be poor” – he is also keen to win the love of his lady by impressing her with the material dimensions of his generosity:

So now
I buy for you most all
A first-class train
Complete of head-rest
And cushions and all
And everything (ll. 12-17)

The implicit historical allusions in the last stanza of the poem are significant because they re-examine and invert the legacy of a well-known figure of colonialism:

We go Cape Town to Cairo
On a lovers’ walk
Me and you just
Oh my sweetest dear lovely (ll. 18-21)

Cecil John Rhodes’s dream of an imperial road stretching from the Cape to Cairo is presented here as “a lovers’ walk”. Thus Africa, or that part of it claimed by colonial conquest, is reclaimed as the domain of poor Africans, the stomping ground of Sepamla’s uneducated subject. The allusion suggests also the hyperbolic bravado of the subject – the stereotypical poor township suitor – by linking his own promises to the dreams of a veritable conqueror of the world. Sepamla’s suitor is not content to buy only “a first-
class train/Complete of head-rest”(ll.14-15), but must conquer the world, or rather re-conquer his own world from colonialism, and hand it over to his lover as objet d’armour.

Why has the unloved and long-dead Rhodes made an appearance in this most unusual of contemporary South African poems? I believe that Sepamla is making a valid statement of criticism about the nature and purposes of ‘education’ for the poor. The poor are ‘educated’ in the military, political and sexual exploits of powerful men. Even though Sepamla’s subject may not have stayed in school long enough to pick up the ‘correct English’, he will nonetheless have heard of Rhodes (the ‘correct Englishman’). Moreover, by placing the Cape to Cairo legacy within the context of a sexual courtship, Sepamla is asserting the repressed sexual dimensions of the colonialist enterprise. One hundred years before Sepamla large parts of Africa were being seized by men and renamed in honour of faraway queens and mistresses. By reclaiming the Cape to Cairo route as his own gift to his lover, the subject retakes and re-uses conquered Africa for his own sexual gratification. No doubt this is no different from what the colonialist men did, but while theirs was a sexual act of colonization and possession, his is a reversal of that process: a sexual act of reclamation and repossession, accomplished in the symbolism of the “lovers’ walk” from Cape Town to Cairo.

To re-emphasise a point I have been making, such depths of meaning are not open to an essentially West-centric critical reading that does itself and poetry disfavour by focusing its investigations at the level of words to the exclusion of the multiple possibilities of identification and retrieval which enrich poems like “Dear Lovely”. In the light of these insights one can answer these naïve readings (and readers) only by quoting Sepamla’s subject himself:
Mzamane (1992: 358) has written that “Statement: The Dodger” (1976: 28) “go[es] beyond protests and depict[s] not just the anomalies of life under apartheid, but also the idiosyncrasies of township people. “Statement: The Dodger”...has a vividness which is unsurpassed even in Mtshali’s poems”. This voices most succinctly my own point: I have been arguing that the idiom of Sepamla’s texts of identification is derived from the language of the subject of apartheid whom Sepamla presents to his reader, and therefore defeats the uninitiated critic. The ‘story’ of “Statement: The Dodger” could be rendered in ‘accessible’ English in roughly the following translation\textsuperscript{14}:

\begin{quote}
No, this world is full of things. This certain fellow I’m speaking about, I know him through seeing him everyday on the street. He comes to me one day and says ‘I’ll be alright tomorrow Jack. Lend me 50c and I’ll fix you up on a Friday when we meet again on the way’. Man, I don’t give it a second thought and I pity God’s child, thinking: blessed is he that gives. I took 50c out of my pocket and gave it to him. Two or three weeks go by and this chap has disappeared. So what’s 50c in these days of the high cost of living? One can’t even buy snuff with that amount. One Saturday afternoon I’m relaxing with friends of mine at Mrs. January’s, next door neighbour to Mrs. May. We were buying lots of alcohol, discussing things as opinion-makers. This guy comes pouring in, I tell you. By then I’m so drunk I’m hot all over: drunk as a sailor, I tell you. The fellow doesn’t see me, whether sincerely or dodging me I don’t know. While he was ordering from the owner of the shebeen a Johnny Walker scotch I jumped up and said: ‘Please fix me up with that parcel.’ Hey! He was busy replying: ‘Don’t be funny’, when I gave him a helluva clap. Women started to scream, and I clapped him again and fingered him in the face. Everybody grabbed my hands. I told them this guy is taking advantage of me, and related the story to them. Now grass has grown under my feet while waiting for him. I don’t like being taken in, especially by people who drink whisky. Like I said, the world is real funny.
\end{quote}

The above statement is simple and unremarkable. It is yet another neighbourhood quarrel in the township that has been turned ugly by violence. Yet what it represents, in its poetic form, is the poet’s willingness to accede to the demands of his subject to speak for

\textsuperscript{14} See APPENDIX for the original
him/herself. In the simple statement of a township quarrel, Sepamla has been able to comment wryly on the influence of religion on his subject (“blessed is he that gives”, l.14), education and privilege (“I-session yamadoda ane-public opinion”, l.27), as well as the suspicion and resentment caused by money and class (“I don’t like promises/Especially from people who drink whisky”, ll. 54-55). Yet in accomplishing all this, not once does the poet stand high up on a lonely crag and look down upon his subject in an affectation of superior wisdom: rather, the subject speaks. The elements and anomalies of his life are not ‘theorized’, but are lived. Moreover, they are lived with such vividness, such verisimilitude, that the poem makes nonsense of the charge that the conditions of ‘blackness’ are not sufficiently thought out. In poetry as well as in life, it is contemptible sophistry to try to ‘think out’ the immediately liveable. Michael Chapman ended his South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective chapter on committed poetry by stating the following:

Soweto poetry [sic] has established its own criteria of value in the quality of its dialectical exploration and its fidelity to the full weight and depth of the Black Experience (1984: 240).

I will conclude my discussion by pointing out that the poetry of commitment, certainly since Sepamla, has been concerned with capturing in words the lived experiences of the subject of apartheid. This attempt leads the poet to discover ‘texts of identification’ in place of the limited and compromised ‘texts of representation’. The scheme of categorization I am proposing seems to me more tenable than the usual binary opposition of ‘protest’ and ‘resistance’. Viewed in the light of this scheme, Sepamla may be appreciated as the most ‘progressive’ of the committed poets. Both his literary and sociological accomplishments remain, in my view, unsurpassed: his literary achievement
was to take the idiom of township life and bring it into the realm of mainstream cultural activity, as well as to craft his poetry to reflect the lived experiences of its subject. And if poetry must answer to sociology, then Sepamla, far from being a ‘liberal’ (in the pejorative usage of the word), represents a step forward in black poetry by transcending the limits of representation, and by foregrounding ‘blackness’ in a way far more vivid and realistic than the sloganeering which may often result from more adequately ‘theorized’ poetry.

Is it all that unfortunate that Sepamla could only achieve this progress through texts whose receptive accessibility excludes a portion of the South African readership, a portion which by virtue of its economic power and institutional privileges, is more articulate and influential than Sepamla’s own targeted readership?
CONCLUSION

Many people in South Africa to this day continue to speak of the poetry I have discussed as ‘Soweto poetry’. This is a designation that I have, as far as possible, avoided. It is a designation that seems at least partially due to Michael Chapman’s 1982 collection of essays, interviews, and critical pieces, which he titled *Soweto Poetry*. In his introduction, Chapman as editor defends the practice of labelling diverse poets like Sepamla, Serote, Ndebele, Van Wyk and others as ‘Soweto poets’ by appealing to the fact that the poetry took its impetus from the 1976 “Soweto disturbances” (1982: 11). It would unfortunately not be the last time that Chapman refers to ‘Soweto poetry’ or registers the historical watershed of June 16 1976 as a “disturbance”. The critic dismisses a host of other possible labels:

The [poetry] goes by different names. It has been called Post-Sharpeville poetry, township poetry, the New Black Poetry of the Seventies, Participatory poetry and People’s poetry, as well as Soweto Poetry. These labels all have a certain fitness. Soweto poetry, however, does seem the most satisfactory term for a distinct genre which emerged after the almost total proscription in the sixties of a previous generation of black South African literature…. Soweto, as a social and metaphysical entity, has continued to provide the stimulus for a poetry which has generally adopted a stark English idiom and a ghetto-derived imagery, and which has eschewed rhyme and closed forms in favour of open or ‘naked’ forms. These stylistic features have proved to be utterly appropriate to the rigours of contemporary black South African experience (1982: 11).

Thus Chapman seems to rely on two leading arguments for the appropriateness of his label. First he highlights the break the poetry makes with ‘traditional’ (read white) forms

---

before it, what we may call its ‘difference’. Secondly there is the importance of Soweto as metaphor. This last argument relies on a reversed reading of South Africa’s recent political history. It should be remembered that, as Chapman himself admits, ‘Soweto poetry’ began to appear in the late 1960s, and therefore predates the symbolic significance of Soweto as site of the ‘disturbances’ by as much as a decade. The argument from ‘difference’ relies on our willingness to accept the difference and therefore the othering of the poetry. It is an argument that goes to the heart of my critique of the usages of ‘discipline’ and disciplinary power in the South African critical practice. Moreover, it is not too dissimilar to Stephen Watson’s generous attempts to excuse the quality (the “intellectual poverty”) of black poetry by blaming the ravages of Bantu Education.

It seems to me that neither geographical nor the temporal realities of our history support the initial usage of ‘Soweto poetry’, let alone its continued currency thanks to justifications like the above. Add to this the sheer amount of political insensitivity needed to continue using this terminology, and I have rejected it even as a way of referring to the three poets who were most identified with ‘Soweto poetry’.

Perhaps one can overlook the clear evidence of disciplinary power inherent in modes of thinking from the 1980s. But throughout I have used the alternative ‘committed poetry’ or, as in my title, ‘the poetry of commitment’. Here I have been consciously following Jacque Alvarez-Pereyre’s usage in The Poetry of Commitment in South Africa (1984). I have, however, been using ‘committed poetry’ in a sense far narrower than that employed by Alvarez-Pereyre, who seems to view most black poetry of the twentieth century as ‘committed’. Alvarez-Pereyre’s generous definition does,
however, have the advantage of recognising historical links with earlier traditions of literary commitment in South Africa.

One of the questions that has engaged the South African critical community about committed poetry is the question of language. Why should black writers committed to African cultural renewal – as Black Consciousness was – be determined to write in ‘the language of the conqueror’? And many an interesting answer has been given, more often than not revealing yet again in operation the politics of disciplinary power. Stephen Gray, writing in his *Southern African Literature: An Introduction* (1979), makes the rather astonishing claim that “English as a lingua-franca is in practice detached enough from any ruling hegemony to continue to act as useful medium in almost all Southern African contexts” (1979: 3). This bizarre and careless claim, completely free of any consideration of the hegemonic power inherent in language, seems to rely on an implicit definition of hegemonic power as repressive and therefore state-controlled. We have already seen how a Foucauldian analysis rejects this form of essentialism. Our analysis, or any analysis which is even slightly deeper than Gray’s discursive essentialism, will take cognisance of the ideological functions of language in mapping out and limiting the space of utterance within a given power configuration. This discursive essentialism was identified by Mike Kirkwood, in his *Poetry South Africa* (1976) essay “The Colonizer”, as a way of thinking about English that could be termed “Butlerism” (1976: 102). It usually posits not only the innocence of the English language, but sometimes even goes so far as to plead the innocence of English-speakers *as a group*, and to suggest that they and their language are removed from the power struggles of twentieth-century South
Africa. But Kirkwood, writing honestly about the position of the English-speaking liberal in South Africa, shows an illuminating and historically informed self-examination:

If the English South African is not in the middle, where is he? We need only use the vertical rather than the horizontal model to establish that we are not in the middle because we are on top. It is only in numerical terms that we constitute a minority of English. It is clear that in sociological terms we are of the White majority, the dominant group…. The racial oligarchy which is the political expression of our culture is not the creation of the Afrikaner alone…(1976: 108)

Such sentiments, hard as it may be to believe, are not really commonplace in South Africa, where the innocence of English is still assumed. The battles of 1976, after all, were for the right to learn in English, not the African languages or Afrikaans – the ‘language of the oppressor’.

Looking for a way to characterise South African poetry in English, Geoffrey Haresnape chose to celebrate its ‘diversity’ as its distinguishing feature and its strength:

The special feature of contemporary South African poetry in English is that it is being created by men and women of many backgrounds. Taken as a whole, it is a body of work which cannot become the pride of – and certainly cannot become the tool of – any single racial, national or ideological group (1976: 44)

Interestingly, what is being denied here – that any group could fashion a political tool out of English poetry – is precisely what the committed poets sought to do. Haresnape is implicitly assuming a rejection of their entire aesthetic project in pleading the neutrality of English. These sentiments may have been considered progressive in the mid-seventies. Indeed, we in the present are all too familiar with the contemporary, usually state-sanctioned celebration of South African ‘diversity’ – which seems always to be expressible only in English. What this sentiment ignores – what was not even possible for Haresnape to gain access to – is how the racial diversity of the work produced in
English is both sign and function of the efficient operation of discipline. It now seems only correct to point out that the diverse group of writers producing poetry in English enter the field of production from vastly unequal positions. Stephen Watson has already helpfully pointed out to us that the culprit was Bantu Education, for its failure to “educate” black writers toward what Nadine Gordimer in *The Black Interpreters* called the “Kilimanjaro” that is poetry (1973: 51).

The assumed innocence of English usually leads to the explicit exercise of disciplinary power through bluntly seeking to maintain control over ‘our common lingua-franca’. This is how Njabulo Ndebele explained it:

> Practically, this need to maintain control over English by its native speakers has given birth to a policy of manipulative open-mindedness in which it is held that English belongs to all who use it provided that it is used correctly. It is assumed, of course, that it is the native speakers who will determine the standards of correctness. In other words, you really cannot control what will eventually happen to English in the hands of non-native speakers; but then you can control it. This is the art of giving away the bride while insisting that she still belongs to you (1991: 100)

An example of this partial cession of the bride is A.G. Ullyatt’s “Dilemmas in Black Poetry” (1977), where the writer discusses at length the ‘over-preponderance’ of the expletive in the new black poetry as a sign of linguistic immaturity. Douglas Livingstone, in his 1976 essay “Notes towards a Critical Evaluation”, actually *counts* the number of times that Mongane Serote uses the image of dongas in his poetry, in support of his statement that “Serote’s thematic imagery is the most limited of the three poets under review [Mtshali, Serote, Sepamla]” (1982: 159). Against this linguistic criticism Jeremy Cronin wrote that reactions and evaluations of committed poetry until the mid-1980s were characterised by what he termed “sterile and critical antimonies” that “haunt
appraisal of [committed] poetry” (1985: 43). Cronin showed that Serote’s “What’s in this Black ‘Shit’?”, the poem that had caused Ullyatt’s distress with its free use of the ‘four-letter word’, is engaged in a sophisticated inversion of racist discourse that is missed by the critic’s knee-jerk and superficial reading. Committed poetry developed, according to Cronin:

under the broader aegis of Black Consciousness ideology. Black Consciousness ideology highlights the problem of language and its material effects on the consciousness and behaviour of racially oppressed individuals (1985: 44).

In this dissertation I have already highlighted, in the last chapter on Sipho Sepamla, how language is made to function in committed poetry as a means of bringing down pressure upon the assumptions and discursive practices of the powerful.

To conclude, I have argued that committed poetry of the Black Consciousness decade attempted to assimilate the complex and fraught debates and definitions of blackness into their literary activity. Their poetry was the inscription of black, often subaltern, subjectivity into an urban cultural landscape that was hostile to the black presence. Some attempts were more successful than others; Sipho Sepamla, for instance, is able to convince in his representations of subaltern blackness precisely because of the refusal, in his work, of the textual practice of representation. Mongane Serote, on the other hand, makes compelling yet problematic claims of belonging predicated on the trope of ‘Mother’ as a metaphor of origins.

I contend that the reading of this poetry, from its initial reception in the 1970s to the academic attention given to it in the present, has failed to retrieve from it all possible dimensions of meaning. This has been due mainly to the subject positions of the relevant
critics, but is ultimately the function of a century-old practice of discipline in the
discursive field in South Africa.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Cronin, Jeremy. 1985. “‘The law that says/ constricts the breath-line (…)’: South African English language poetry written by Africans in the 1970s”. In English Academy Review, no. 3.


Van Wyk, Chris. 1978. “We Can’t Meet Here Brother”. In Staffrider vol. 1 no. 2.


APPENDIX

“Statement: The Dodger”

Hayi ke mos
This world inento zawo

This fellow-ndini ndithi speak about
Ndimplhelele, I’m used to him ngaloo way
Yokumthi-see everyday on the street

He comes to me one day
You know nge-same way
Ka-I’ll be alright tomorrow Jack
He says ndimthi-borrow i-five bob
Uzandithi-fixup on a Friday
Xa sithi-meet again on the way

Hayi man I don’t give lento I-second thought
Ndamthi-pity umntu kaThixo
Ngale ngqondo ka-blessed is he that gives
Ndathi rwaa i-five bob out of my pocket
Ndayithi give to him
Next thing I walk away

Two three weeks go by
Le chap ithe-disappear
Not a ghost sign of him anywhere

Ke what is five bob these days ze-cost of living
One can’t even buy snuff ngaloo amount

One Saturday afternoon
Ndisathi-relax ne-friends of mine kwa-Mrs January
Yi-next door neighbour ka-Mrs May
We were doing woza-2 woza-4
I-session yamadoda ane-public opinion
In walks this fellow
Wagaleleka I tell you

Ndiphi by then
Kwa-Love and Peach
Andinxilanga ndiyashusha
Drunk as a sailor I tell you

I-fellow le he doesn’t see me
Whether fair or foul I don’t know
Wathi esathi kwi-owner of the joint
One scotch here: Johnny Walker
I jumped up and said
Khawundincede bhuti ngalaa parcel
Hey!
Wathi esandithi-reply ngo-don’t be funny
Ndathi-take five!
A helluva clap leyo

Women started to scream
Ndathi: take six!
A clap plus ndamthi-point nge-one finger

Everybody grabbed my hands

I told them straight
Le guy ithi-take advantage of me
Ithe-borrow five bob from me other day long ago
Endithi-promise ukuyithi-return on a Friday
Soon soon
Now grass has grown under my feet

I don’t like promises
Especially from people who drink whisky

Hayi ke mos
The world is real funny