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UKZN Historical Studies Seminar

Black Consciousness and the Politics of Culture in 20th Century South Africa

The following is Chapter Seven of my book – *The Law and the Prophets: Black Consciousness in South Africa, 1968 – 1977* (Jo'burg: Jacana, 2010). The book traces the intellectual history of Black Consciousness from the late sixties until Steve Biko's death and the banning of Black Consciousness organizations in 1977. I focus mainly in the role of Christian thinking and theology in the 1970s political project. The book's first two sections are on the development of Black Consciousness political and religious thought until around 1972; the third follows the ideas that resulted through tumultuous middle-1970s. Chapter Seven is the first chapter of the third part and examines activists' evolving thinking about cultural production as a tool for liberation.

I wanted to share this chapter in part because it is material that I have not presented before; and in part because my new project – tentatively entitled *Engaging Images: Artists and the Art of Life in 20th Century South Africa* – is concerned with similar questions. The turn to 'political' art in the 1970s echoed a wider change in what activists thought of as "ethical" behavior - intellectual, political and aesthetic – during these years. Many scholars have taken this turn for granted. A great deal of the scholarship on black cultural production, for example, focuses on political art, Soweto poetry, people's theater – all of which emerged as explicit discursive practices in the wake of the events discussed below. So too is this ethic with us in the wider historiography on 20th century black South Africa, where most work, until very recently, has focused almost exclusively on political economy and the struggle against apartheid.

I am currently researching this new project, but have not written anything yet. I will introduce its scope and rehearse some of its arguments in my presentation to the UKZN seminar.

Chapter Seven

‘I Write What I Like’:
Conscientization, Culture and Politicization

Over the course of 1971, Basil Moore and Stanley Ntwasa of the University Christian Movement collected papers from 1971’s theology seminars to be published in South Africa under the title *Essays in Black Theology*. Like their editors, however, the essays were banned after a brief run. Two years later, from exile in Great Britain, Moore published the collection with the title *Black Theology: The South African Voice.* The latter title was altogether more appropriate. Developing the black community’s voice was Black Consciousness thinkers’ most enduring concern. Activists believed that South Africa’s problems would begin to be solved if and when blacks were “capable of entering into dialogue with white members of this country as equals who speak from a position of strength rather from a position of weakness.”[1] Separation from sympathetic whites was explained in terms of the cultivation of this voice; having established their own organizations the *SASO Newsletter’s* letters page now invited its readers to “Speak Black Man!” Steve Biko’s famed columns in the same publication made this so explicit as to be easily overlooked; in a society where blacks were

1 “Black Community Programmes Year Report 1972,” KGC Pt. 3 F270, 3.

perceived as a faceless, voiceless and inarticulate gaggle, there was untold power in writing 'what I like.'

To this point, I have focused on the small group of thinkers and activists who were instrumental in crafting Black Consciousness and Black Theology; I have traced how they developed their voice, from the advent of SASO through the cultivation of the uniquely "South African Voice" that spoke of Christ's liberating message for their country. By 1971 – 2, this group knew and spoke of themselves as blacks in the image of God; with their voices and pens, they had, as Biko wrote, "started on the road towards emancipation."[2] Speaking and writing are powerful acts, especially under a political system that constrained the vast majority of the population's capacity to do either, and in a society where, in the late 1960s, an estimated sixty percent of the population over the age of ten was considered functionally illiterate.[3] Black Consciousness thinkers and activists trusted in the power of creative

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2 Biko, *I Write What I Like,* ed. Aelred Stubbs, (London: Bowerdean Publishing, 1996 (1978)), 48.

3 "Literacy Project," KGC Pt. 3 F928, 2. Recent literary theory links 'voice' – with its ability to narrate and articulate the desires and experiences of the self – with the spread of a supposedly universal discourse of human rights, the most essential of which is, of course, freedom of speech. In the South African context, the power of speech was fundamental to the conception and methodology of the Truth and Reconciliation Commision, with its argument that victims narrating and perpetrators confessing would hasten reconciliation and renewal. Elizabeth Anker, "Fictions of Dignity: Human Rights and the Post-Colonial Novel," paper given at Cornell University, 11 March 2008; see also S. Schaffer and S. Smith, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004).

talk; they were the youths who had eagerly flocked to high school debating groups to argue that "the pen is mightier than the sword," the literate vanguard who first read and then had cultivated the ability to write about the issues that mattered to them.[4] The problem was with the rest of black society; how could the vast majority become new selves without a voice?

Issues of literacy, writing and other cultural activities had been among the UCM's earliest concerns. Beginning in 1968, activists discussed the need for a widespread literacy program. Led by Colin Collins, the UCM worked to organize workshops on literacy training and various students spent their vacations teaching African workers – often the staff at their universities – the rudiments of reading and writing, typically with materials from the Johannesburg-based Bureau of Literacy and Education, an NGO that worked closely with the ministry of Bantu Education.[5] UCM activists cited these efforts in a 1969 appeal to the Transkei government for permission to work on adult education in that territory, even as activists' ideas about literacy were beginning

4 Zithulele Cindi, interview by the author, 13 March 2006, Johannesburg, South Africa; Harry Nengwekhulu, interview by the author. For the importance of debating clubs, see also Glaser, *Bo-Tsotsi: The Youth Gangs of Soweto,* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000), Ch. 7 and Isabel Hofmeyr, "Reading Debating/Debating Writing: The Case of the Lovedale Debating Society, or Why Mandela Quotes Shakespeare," in Karin Barber, ed. *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and the Making of the Self,* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

5 "Memo: On University Students Work and Study Projects in the Transkei," 3/68, HP AD1126 D5 (a)(i), 2.

to change. By then, UCM’s literacy committee was considering recent and more radical methods from the States and elsewhere; foremost among these was Paulo Freire’s method of literacy and cultural education. By late 1969 Freire’s unattributed influence was obvious in an essay that rejected the Bureau of Literacy and Education both for its complicit relationship with Bantu Education, and for its methods. Whereas the Bureau was accused of treating adult students as “vacuums” to be filled by “teachers,” UCM imagined its adult students as thinking subjects who “even though … unschooled and illiterate, have knowledge, wisdom, insight and creativity.”[6] As Freire’s South African translators explained, literacy was not just about being able to read censored newspapers and exploitative labor contracts; instead, true literacy was about the construction of autonomous selves. Freire called for teachers not to preach, but to listen, not to enforce ideology, but, in a crude English term translated from the Portuguese *conscientiçazão,* to conscientize. As UCM found itself under attack in 1971 and 1972, its members voted to transfer the literacy project’s resources to SASO; given Freire’s resonance with their own ideas, it

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6 Above, and “The Educational Method of the Literacy Project of the UCM,” HP AD1126 D5 (a)(i), 1. This same file includes, among other essays on Freire, Thomas Sanders “The Paulo Freire Method [of] Literacy Training and Conscientization,” June 1968, an essay written by an American education student that the UCM sought to distribute, only to be stopped by an American organization’s copyright claim. As elsewhere, South African activists responded simply by restating the article’s insights in their own voice. (Letter from Moore to Director, American Universities Field Staff, inc., 15 December 1970, and letter from Spitzer to Moore, 20 January 1971.)

made sense that SASO activists approached Anne Hope, a former Freire student and friend of Collins's, and asked her to train them in Freire's method.

"Conscientization" is undoubtedly a familiar concept to many students of South African politics. From the mid-1970s through the 1980s, South African activists used this term to describe the process of spreading political awareness. As such, conscientization is linked to protest, and a community's readiness to engage in political struggle is seen as the degree to which it had been successfully 'conscientized.' This chapter weaves conscientization as a theme in order to show how activists transformed a pedagological concept into an ideological one; how ideas about subjectivity and voice moved through literacy and cultural creativity to call for a politicization of the personal – new South African selves who spoke with one voice about one subject in particular: life under apartheid, and the demands of struggle.

"Conscientisation is my mission."

When SASO leaders approached Anne Hope in early 1972 she was only too happy to offer her services. "I thought he [Freire] was the answer to all the problems," she told me, and felt that "anyone who was a bit awake" would embrace the Brazilian's method.[7] Over the

7 Anne Hope, interview by the author, 24 May 2006, Cape Town, South Africa.

course of 1972, Biko, Pityana and other Black Consciousness activists met with Hope every other month to learn to apply Freire's insights to their situation. Freire's ideas resonated with Biko, who had once plotted self-reflection as the critical moment, after which "you have committed yourself to fight."[8] As such, he sketched a direct relationship between reflection – critical thought – and action; the same dialectical relationship that was at the heart of Freire's *conscientiçazão.* Freire defined the term as "critical self-insertion into reality" by the oppressed. The agent was critical here; to be conscientized was not simply to be made aware, but to make oneself aware. Freire's English editor elaborated on this: conscientization was the "process by which men, not as recipients but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality."[9] Conscientization thus named the process by which students would educate themselves to become 'selves' and then, once they had achieved critical consciousness, work for societal transformation. Critical consciousness

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8 Biko, *I Write What I Like,* 42.

9 Paulo Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom*, (New York: Penguin, 1972 (1970)), 42, 51.

was primary; as Freire put it, man's "reflective presence" humanized the world and made political progress possible.[10]

We must be clear about the roles prescribed here. The politically conscious few were not the agents in Freire's scheme. Instead, they were facilitators who were supposed to create the conditions under which conscientization – "*self*-insertion into reality" – might occur. Freire's method was indeed methodical, as Anne Hope explains: it began with a slow, painstaking process of conducting "listening surveys" among a target population, that was used to plot the best way to "encode" people's own language, symbols and epistemologies. The goal was not to impart revolutionary consciousness but consciousness itself, and to trust that the people's "awakened" consciousness would make political change inevitable.[11] Listening surveys meant going to the people. Malusi Mpumlwana, for example, recalls spending his weekends while enrolled at the UNB – Medical School going to shebeens around Durban not for entertainment, but research. He and other SASO members at the Med School focused on areas, like Gandhi's Phoenix settlement, that were plagued with

10 SASO activists ran not only with Freire's term, but also with his method of education as expressed in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Peter Jones, a Coloured activist in the Eastern Cape, for example, referred to the book as "the bible as written by Paulo Freire … It used to be the standard book. You would find it everywhere and everybody read it." KGC Pt. 1 F13, 6.

11 Anne Hope, interview by the author.

undeveloped infrastructure and poor sanitation. There, activists, in keeping both with Freire's teaching and Black Consciousness own dictates ("Black man, you are on your own"), endeavored to inculcate the "self-help spirit" rather than solve the people's problems. Following Freire, Mpumlwana recalls, "our agenda was to try and build a mass capacity of critical consciousness" from which "action [would] flow."

This was neither charity – ridiculed as the redoubt of white liberals – nor overt politicization. Rather, Mpumlwana instructs, the goal was "critical consciousness … what I call 'bright-light' consciousness," as opposed to mass consciousness.[12] That was Black Consciousness true to its roots: thinking, analyzing, but not determining. Telling people what to believe was not the point; as another UNB student put it, "we did not say, look, we have come to teach you about Black Consciousness," rather, "we were doing Black Consciousness, we were enacting Black Consciousness there."[13] The emphasis was on slow, methodical work in order to help people generate analysis, and only then to interrogate and act against the roots of their situation. Mpumlwana recognized the political dangers here: "the best way to mobilize and galvanize people is not to make

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12 Malusi Mpumlwana, interview by the author.

13 Testimony of Aubrey Mokoape, HP AD1719 Reel 4, 4828. Walter Rodney's short, but insightful study *The Groundings with my Brothers,* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1969) demonstrates how Caribbean activists tried a similar approach.

them all critically conscious, but is really to get them all to follow," he told me. That was what previous political movements had done, with spectacular results. The willingness to follow was, Freire explained, "mass" consciousness and Mpumlwana conceded that it "actually is better for political organization than critical consciousness. Because [with] critical consciousness, people might actually not get anywhere." [14] Indeed, Freire's theory offered no guarantee that the people, once conscientized, would act 'appropriately.' Nor did Freire-esque patience satisfy more radical critics; poverty was a pressing problem at the Phoenix settlement and around South Africa and more materially-inclined white radicals roundly condemned SASO for wasting its time on listening sessions while people continued to die from disease.[15]

Critiques aside, the way in which the concept of conscientization twinned anti-determination and faith in inevitable change fit comfortably with the rest of the Black Consciousness philosophy. To SASO activists, their emphasis on conscientization distinguished themselves and their activities from more conventional politics.

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14 Freire, *Cultural Action for Liberation,* 67.

15 Mpumlwana, interview by the author. It's a bit of a stretch, but worth noting that this argument is still playing out today regarding the South African government's AIDS policy. There is a bit of Black Consciousness in the government's convoluted stance: that charity (in this case from Western drug companies, etc.) is not enough, that the people need to build the capacity to solve problems themselves and will never be able to do this if they remain dependent on the wealthy West. Then on the other hand, you have ostensibly pragmatic NGOs and others arguing that such theories distract from the real-time struggle.

Clement Mokoka, a Catholic priest in Pretoria worked closely with that city's SASO branch – known as PRESO (Pretoria Students Organisation.) Nowhere in his discussion of concientization did the question of politics come in; rather, it was about people "talking … and we would send some students to go just to town with the workers and try to listen to what they are talking about."[16] Former UNB student Aubrey Mokoape scoffed at the notion that the Phoenix development project was in fact groundwork for a Black Consciousness political party: "it was not as if we were out for a membership drive, " he told a Pretoria court.[17] This anti-politics idea of conscientization was at the center of Black Consciousness activists' self-conception of their not-quite-politics-yet-still-political project. "Our idea was not a political party, our idea was conscientization of society," Mpumlwana insists. "We already had political parties and that was not the point. Its not about an organization, its about … how you treat yourself, and how you relate to your environment."[18] Indeed, recalling SASO's early critique of post-colonial politics, political parties were not to be trusted. They indoctrinated, Strini Moodley explained, and "indoctrination implies

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16 Clement Mokoka, interview by the author.

17 HP AD1719 Reel 4, 4829.

18 Malusi Mpumlwana, interview by the author.

that you have a particular philosophy … or value system that you wish to impose upon a people, whereas conscientisation implies … you believe that it is not for me as an individual to [impose] things upon another individual."[19] To do so would be to deny the being of the other, to treat people as mere "receptacles" to be filled by some all-knowing teacher.[20] No, Moodley continued, the important thing "is to make the other individual appreciate from his own point of view and through his own analysis of the society what is wrong with society. I am not going to tell people this is wrong and that is wrong or you must do this … rather than impose something, you raise questions in the minds of people."[21] In this sense conscientization carried on the process we saw in Ch. 1, when those who became Black Consciousness activists recalled their own 1960s experiences with teachers, peers or books, and how they began to ask questions of the sources and draw their own conclusions. Conscientization was "consulting the mind," it was listening to the people and raising questions, in hopes that "they would think."[22] Imposing doctrine from above could create mass

19 Testimony of Strini Moodley, HP AD1719 Reel 7, 7335.

20 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* (New York: Continuum, 1993 (1970)), 53.

21 HP AD1719 Reel 7, 7335

22 Harry Nengwekhulu, interview by the author.

consciousness, as both Freire and Mpumlwana explained, but doing so was antithetical to the dialogic, reflective processes implicit in conscientization.

This tension proved hard to maintain. The righteousness of orthodoxy was put down in SASO thinking, but just as free-thinking Christianity could result in right-thinking Black Theology, so too was the potential for proscribed doctrine a possibility. After all, our definition of Black Consciousness as religion ("we believe in it, we think it is right") contained within it not just a strong assertion of the collective's subjectivity, but also the assurance that followed belief. As Freire envisioned it, conscientization was to be open-ended; the dialogue had a desired end, but those in the already-conscious vanguard were not to "impose" their opinion on the subject. It is striking, therefore, to hear Oshadi Mangena, another Pretoria activist, describe her understanding of the process. We "always talked about the three c's," she told me: "you make them aware first so the first C stands for conscientization. I think it was something from Paulo Freire - Conscientise. Then you can cooperate or collaborate with the people who agree with you. But if when you have conscientised them they still do not want to go the right way, then you confront them. That's the third C."[23] This language marked a departure from Freire. By confronting those who "do not want to go the right way," South African

activists were claiming that they held the answer; theirs was “the right way” and, by implication, other ways were not.

This sense of mission undermined and eventually collapsed the dialogic tension that Freire had maintained. This change was in some sense a by-product of evolving political circumstances. Indeed, even as activists embraced Freire’s method and worked diligently to listen and develop codes with which to approach the wider population, some worried that activists had politics too much on the mind. “Their codes were too radical,” Anne Hope recalls, “and they raised anxiety in some of the people they were working with.”[24] Consequently, conversations could veer away from dialogue to pressure. Dan Mogale and Simon Mashiangwako, PRESO activists, demonstrated this; when they spoke of conscientization they described it as a sort of exclusive knowledge or insight that they and other activists possessed. Conscientization, they suggest, was wielded to force people to action: information was “our key conscientization tool,” not to help people ask questions, but to “make people move.” As with Mangena’s example, above, their account of conscientization was more doctrinaire, more politicizing. Although activists employed the Freirean idiom of “codes” and

23 Oshadi Mangena, interview by the author. I asked her if these “three c’s” were a response to the British empire’s famed three: Christianity, commerce and civilization. She claimed it was just a coincidence.

24 Anne Hope, interview by the author.

“developing” consciousness, they did so to force confrontation, to “make people move” in a particular direction.[25] Indeed, in an undated article delivered to a SASO General Student Congress, Vic Mafungo made this other use of conscientization even more explicit: Freire’s term, he explained, meant “making blacks aware of the need for liberation.”[26]

‘Conscientization’ was thus increasingly used as a euphemism for what in another context might have been called simply politicization. Reflecting from the late 1970s on the importance of the Black Consciousness Movement, for example, one former activist conflated the two. Movement supporters “must continue to politicise people, to conscientise, [at] which they have been very good,” he contended.[27] Black Consciousness leaders themselves seized on this: the 1970s, Mosibudi Mangena insisted, revealed the “liberatory, conscientized … political energy in the country that saw the beginning of the decline of the system.”[28] Conscientization here moved beyond the realm of the

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25 Dan Mogale and Dan Mogale and Simon Mashiangwako, interviews by the author.

26 Vic Mafungo, “Some Aspects of Community Development,” undated, KGC Pt. 3 F746, 9.

27 Shun Chetty, interview by SANA, 1979, Gabarone, Botswana. KGC Pt. 1 F6, 9.

28 Mosibudi Mangena, interview by the author, 6 December 2005, Pretoria, South Africa.

slow creation of awareness to signify concern with liberation – and not only that. It was also about cultivating a perspective on politics that was associated with a particular group who knew the way.

Given the religiosity pervasive in Black Consciousness thought, it is not surprising that activists spoke about conscientization in terms of conversion. When asked how God justified conscientization, Rev. Simon Farisani, who we earlier saw prophesize about the Black Messiah, answered without hesitation. He cited Matthew 28: 18 – 20, Christ's "Great Commission," which instructed, "go ye into the world and speak to the people, teach them everything that I have taught you."[29] This was a remarkable statement. The "Great Commission" had long served to justify European mission, of which SASO and Christian activists were not great fans. Yet here a Black Consciousness leader embraced mission's logic, even if cloaked in Freire's humanism. This was a critical admission. A hierarchy of knowledge rests at mission's core; missionaries know and believe that others need to know what they know. The mission encounter has been called a long conversation, but it is a conversation in which one side repeatedly claimed to have a monopoly on universal and eternal truth. Although empathy and political sympathy might lead us to embrace Black Consciousness'

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29 Testimony of Simon Farisani, AD1719 Reel 8, 8777.

particular righteousness, we should note how its embrace of mission marked a final departure from faith in change rooted in dialogue to one rooted in orthodoxy. Conscientization meant conversion; it meant recognizing those “who can be converted into the kind of black people we’d like to have in the struggle” and dismissing those who could not.[30] This was a different sort of Black Consciousness – not enacted in self-help schemes and concomitant awareness, but an object to be wielded. “I believe we should propagate Black Consciousness as a philosophy,” a Johannesburg area activist told a court in the mid-1970s, “because the Black people need an … ideology in order to bind them together, so that they know what they are fighting for.”[31] For this activist, Black Consciousness did not mean projecting one’s beingness as a creation of God; Black Consciousness meant instead an ideology and a political movement.

An aesthetic interlude

This transformation suggests that Anne Hope’s was right to worry that SASO’s codes were too radical. Students were trained in the Freirean method and attempted to utilize it across 1972, but literacy

30 Dan Mogale and Simon Mashiangwako, interview by the author.

31 Testimony of Xola Nuse, AD1899, *S. v. Molobi*, Vol. 1, 65.

programs never took off in the way she and others had hoped. Although there were some successes – PRESO in particular enjoyed great success, albeit with children more than adults – Hope later reflected that most activists used Freire's methods "much more in theater" and other potentially politicizing venues.[32] This was a progression that Freire's own theories supported, as he wrote that following encoding and conscientization, the arts would "gradually cease to be a mere expression of the easy life of the affluent bourgeoisie and begin to find their inspiration in the hard life of the people."[33] A quick survey at the decade's cultural politics supports Anne Hope's assessment that this was what Black Consciousness cultural activists had sought to achieve. The 1970s saw not only a

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32 Anne Hope, interview by the author; for the PRESO programs, see especially Mosibudi Mangena, *On Your Own: The Evolution of Black Consciousness in South Africa/Azania,* (Florida Hills, South Africa: Vivlia, 1989), 25 – 30. The literacy programs left little evidence in the various archives that I consulted, and my efforts to probe them further met with little success; when I asked Clement Mokoka about the success of the PRESO program that his church had helped to run, he noted only that "everybody that we've trained we always found those people being very useful." (interview by the author) Among the precious few documents on the programs was a simple primer in the UCM files; entitled "My Brother!" it described an African man coming home from work, robbed and left for dead. No one offers him assistance – until a "drunk coloured" happens by, fortifies him with some brandy and finds help. The primer thus taught both language and Black Consciousness's message of 'black' unity. HP AD1126 D(a)(iii). For much more on this, see Leslie Hadfield "A History of the Community Development Programs of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa, 1969-1977," (PhD diss., Michigan State University, forthcoming). See also Anne Hope's assessment of the same in Patricia Romero, *Profiles in Diversity: Women in the New South Africa,* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1998).

33 Freire, *Cultural Action,* 66.

political and theological resurgence, but also an effluence of artistic production. From poetry published in the SASO newsletter and other media, to the increasing popularity of township theater and the musical stylings of Lefifi Tladi, Phillip Tabane and others, black South African culture enjoyed a 'renaissance' of a particular sort in the early 1970s.[34] New cultural output reflected the Black Consciousness aesthetic: as a mid-1970s magazine put it, given the circumstances of black life, "we cannot waste our time on comical dramas" and escapist fantasies. Rather, since "we live in times of war where a Black man cannot stop thinking of his liberation," 'art,' like philosophy and theology, needed to be a relevant part of the evolving 'conscientizing' project.[35]

As the decade progressed popular culture emerged as the critical arena in which activists, students and others cultivated black South Africa's voice and spread Black Consciousness's ideas. We have seen

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34 This is especially well documented in poetry's case. See for example chapters in Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest,* (New York: Routledge, 1995), David Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History,* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2006) and Michael Chapman's oeuvre, especially *Soweto Poetry: Literary Perspectives,* (Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2007). A recent study that addresses these themes is Bhekizizwe Peterson, "Culture, Resistance and Representation," *Road to Democracy in South Africa,* Vol. 2, (Pretoria: UNISA, 2007).

35 *The Spear Lives On,* joint publication of the P.E.T. and Shiqomo, Sept./Oct. 1974 [?], HP A2176 14, 2. The demeaning reference to "comical dramas" was doubtlessly aimed as Gibson Kente's, whose occasionally escapist fare was all the rage in the early 1970s. The aesthetic concerns expressed here neatly overlaid with Fanon's, as I briefly considered in Ch. 3.

evidence of this already in the poetry that compared Tiro to Christ and elsewhere; and just as the *SASO Newsletter's* turn away from Négritude poets to black American poets had marked a critical break, so too did its prominent publication of works by South African poets, some unknown and others – like Mafika Gwala, Mandla Langa, Sipho Sepamla and Mongane Wally Serote – who were already earning reputations for their Black Conscousness-infused verse.

License was not granted to acclaimed poets alone. Teachers at high schools like Morris Isaacson in Soweto wrote poetry "from the heart" and "disseminated it" to their students, who in turn were invited to create and share their own works.[36] Given their proximity to SASO's nerve center in Durban, Thoko Mbanjwa and other students at Inanda Seminary were well positioned to receive the message of conscientized artistic creativity. As we saw in Ch. 3, teachers there invited local activists to assist in students' English and drama lessons. These "would come and do poetry with us, they would read poetry – and relevant poetry and not Byron, Wordsworth and so on, but much more written by South Africans, written by themselves." Activists would then "encourage us as well, after having small discussions, to write. And we would write and read … the thoughts we had."[37] Individuals crafted

36 Fanyana Mazibuko, interview by the author.

37 Thoko Mpumlwana, interview by the author.

their own voice, but the injunction to create relevant art typically ensured that the end product reflected either the poet's experiences under apartheid or the gathering momentum of renewed struggle against the State. After all, as the prominent Black Consciousness poet James Matthews later wrote, "I wish I could write a/Poem/Record the beginning of/Dawn/The opening of a flower/At the approach of a bee/...Then I look at people/Maimed shackled, jailed/The knowing is now clear/I will never be able to write/A poem about a dawn/...Or a bee."[38]

This aesthetic was not without its critics. Some felt that black creativity was being stifled by an overemphasis on the real over the lyrical. Richard Rive, the famed Coloured novelist and poet, for example, bemoaned the new poetry in a harsh review published in *Pro Veritate.* "Black Consciousness poetry in South Africa is … mediocre," Rive wrote; "the writing is of a highly polemical nature, hysterical, screaming and declamatory." He understood that the era's poets were trying to both describe their experiences and plot a way forward, but the manner in which they did so "becomes a mere listing of grievances interspersed with shrieks for revenge. This type of poetry, obsessed as it is with its message, impairs literary excellence." To live up to its

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38 Matthews became promiment with 1972's *Cry Rage.* These apt verses come from a 1981 collection, recently reprinted in Matthews, *Cry Rage!: The Odyssey of a Dissident Poet,* no page number, (Cape Town: Realities, 2006).

name, he concluded, poetry must “go deeper and beyond any special pleading at any particular time.” Ultimately, Rive concluded: “what [Black Consciousness poets] are producing is not poetry.” [39]

What Rive and other critics failed to appreciate, however, was that Black Consciousness artists were not interested in timelessness, but strove instead for a radical timeliness. As Strini Moodley explained, “a true artist cannot extract himself from his own experience and … talk in objective universal terms.” This was a situational aesthetic and,

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39 Rive, “Poetry in the South African Situation,” *Pro Veritate,* March 1975, 22. Rive’s words were harsh, but, I think, not ill chosen. Much Black Consciousness poetry has failed to inspire more than a superficially historicist reading, or historical evidence of Black Consciousness’s spreading message. There were of course exceptions – Glenn Masokoane’s “Black Nana Arise!” was so lyrical as to be almost entirely inscrutable – but Neelan Pillay’s “Barefeet” was fairly representative:

“Like the millions of cells that cover my feet
Are the black cuts on my feet
Over broken glass, stones and thorns did it travel
In Winter it did bleed red blood
like my heart bleeds white hate
My feet wishes for shoes
My heart wishes Freedom
Many died fighting for my shoes
I don't know exactly when I am going to get my shoes
It might be the next day
It might be the next week
It might be the next year
But it's definitely before the turn of the century.” (from “The Spear Lives On,” op. cit., 7).

The same aesthetic judgment might also be levied against the fiction from the era; works like Serote’s *To Every Birth its Blood,* Sepamla’s *A Ride on the Whirlwind* and Mzamane’s *Children of Soweto* are more history-by-other-means than transcendent works of fiction. As David Attwell has noted, Ndebele’s *Fools and Other Stories* is an exception to this rule and by concentrating on his characters and lyrical description, Ndebele left himself open to the “accusation of fiddling while the townships burned.” (Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity,* 183). On the other hand, Rita Barnard has recently argued that Miriam Tladi managed to write beyond this aeshetic in her late 1970s *Muriel at Metropolian.* Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Ch. 5.

just as theologians had defended their contextual theology, so too did Moodley argue that Western ways of thinking had obscured this essential truth about cultural production. He suggested that the ancient Greeks had turned to theater "to communicate an experience … that the entire community was faced with" – in other words, the politics of the moment – thus black theater was in keeping with this precedent. The aesthetic response to the moment was what mattered. Although Moodley did periodically celebrate black artistic traditions, his aesthetic demanded something of the now.[40] Even as nationalist Africa was undergoing the 'cultural turn' away from politics, Black Consciousness thinkers like Moodley instead aligned their cultural politics with Fanon and Freire, arguing that the "cultural revolution" was made with the 'seething pot, not the sari's faded and irrelevant glories.[41] If this meant that new black art, literature and theater

40 "There were [once] flutes humming musical patterns in unison with the streams of Africa and the sitar was rising and falling in cadence with the torrential rains of India," he wrote. Moodley, "Black Consciousness and the black artist and the emerging black culture," *SASO Newsletter,* May/June 1972, 20.

41 Andew Apter, *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005)*;* Olaniyan, "Thinking Afro-Futures: Epistemic Histories," paper presented at Cornell University, 6 March 2008. In a recent article, Barbara Weinstein urges historians to think their way back from the 'cultural turn' and instead strive to find the language to discuss politics and economic inequality in new ways. (Weinstein, "Developing Inequality.") See also the *SASO Newsletter,* June 1971, 14. For Fanon and culture, see Ch. 3, above. One way in which Black Consciousness artists did move through time was by referring to what they increasingly saw as the 'sacred' history of past suffering. In 1973, for example, a SASO-sponsored art show near Pretoria featured "Sharpeville," a painting by a 21 year old Sowetan that depicted "one young man, a victim who was slowly dying from a bullet in his head." The artist apparently used his own blood for the painting – "sucked from a puncture made in my arm." (*The World,* 26 July 1973, 12 – 13.)

therefore tended to be didactic and repetitive, so be it. “Black writers are preoccupied with politics,” Mbulelo Mzamane told a gathering of black intellectuals in mid-1976, and for that they made no apologies.[42]

This preoccupation with political voice was not without its risks and art often courted government repression, just as theology had done.[43] In the early 1970s, PRESO activists used their church contacts to bring a play entitled *She Lied* – the ‘she’ was a white woman who ‘lied’ about a sexual encounter with a black man – to schools around Pretoria and they recall numerous occasions when police raids followed the final curtain.[44] Similarly, in the spring of 1973 Johannesburg-based cultural activists associated with the People’s Experimental Theatre (PET) performed Mthuli ka Shezi’s play *Shanti* to packed houses and enthusiastic audiences on university campuses and in township venues like the Donaldson Orlando Community Center.[45] The security branch

42 Recorded in the *Rand Daily Mail,* 17 July 1976, 4.

43 Charney’s work demonstrates how Black Consciousness organizations benefited from the expanding literate, urban black public to spread their ideas, which helps explain why poetry and theater were such a prominent part of the movement. See Charney, “Black Power, White Press.”

44 Interviews with Tau Mokoka, Clement Mokoka, Oshadi Mangena, Dan Mogale and Simon Mashiangwako.

45 *The World* counted numerous standing ovations. 2 October 1973, 4.

was less enthused and repeatedly raided encore performances. Few arrests were made, although on one occasion officers apparently "removed the cast's equipment, including a wig."[46]

It is no wonder that plays like *Shanti* garnered the government's attention. Written by a prominent SASO leader, the play was especially radical, even for the Black Consciousness aesethetic, in that Shezi's characters pursued a political program that went far beyond Black Consciousness's more tentative moves in that direction. *Shanti* was the story of the forbidden love between two students, Thabo, an African, and Shanti, an Indian. As the plot unfolds, they reflect on love and on blackness (and on their impending exams), until Thabo is arrested, escapes and flees to Mozambique, where he dies fighting with FRELIMO guerillas. Interspersed with this, Shezi wrote long monologues peppered with Black Consciousness rhetoric, deliverd by the main characters, and their Coloured friend, Koos. To take only one example: at the play's outset, Koos encapsulates recently developed thinking with words that stage directions indicate were addressed directly to the audience:

> Shall I be so easily impressed by parliamentary speeches that the Coloured comes immediately after the White, then follows the rest? Your kind, Shanti, then Thabo's. Are we three not components of Blacks? Are we not Blacks, suffering what we do in degrees? Are we not all Black, who shouldn't only be

46 *The World,* 27 November 1973, 2.

> proud but who should also guard against contamination by induced inferiority complex? Yes, I am Black and inferior to no man … I am Black. Black like my mothers. Black like the sufferers. Black like the continent.[47]

Audiences responded to these ideas. At the trial of activist Eric Molobi during the mid-1970s, numerous witnesses testified to repeated viewings of Shezi's play. It resonated, one said, as a "dramatical portrayal of things I had been thinking about." *Shanti* was widely considered "a play that none can afford to miss."[48]

Shanti's evident success was testament to culture's utility as a means to spread Black Consciousness ideas and conscientize the wider populace.. The play's unique content also helped to ensure that popular culture became wedded to ideological correctness, to the expression of Black Consciousness's particular voice, not that of the still-inarticulate audience. Plays, poems, relevant art and music – all helped to get the word out, even if actors this approach was not exactly what Freire and Anne Hope had intended Shezi wrote the play sometime before his own death, under mysterious circumstances, in late 1972. (See Ch. 9) Its plot – especially the playwright's apparent support for armed struggle, à la Frelimo – was controversial and, as we

47 "Shanti," in Robert Kavanagh, *South African People's Plays,* (London: Heinemann, 1981), 72.

48 HP AD1899, *S. v. Molobi*, Vol. 1, 35, 191; *The World,* 6 November 1973, 5.

have seen, the government's response was heavy-handed. What is notable here is that although *Shanti* contained various Black Consciousness-influenced elements, its precise political agenda was one that neither SASO nor any other Black Consciousness organization shared. Rather, activists staged it at least in part because it had been "Shezi's wish … but unfortunately he died before he could do so." Charged with pushing a revolutionary program, actors pleaded "we are only fulfilling a dead man's wish."[49] The government was not interested in such defenses and used artistic endeavors to charge activists with political agitation.

During the trial of the nine Black Consciousness leaders with which I opened this study, the State repeatedly cited *Shanti* as evidence that SASO and BPC leaders were not merely the cultural activists and intellectuals that they claimed to be. *Shanti,* the government charged, proved that Black Consciousness was "inflammatory, provocative, anti-white, racialistic, subversive and … revolutionary."[50] The defense's two-pronged response was deeply ironic, in that their efforts to forestall a harsh judgement necessitated that they downplay two fundamental tenets of Black Consciousness thought: that revolutions began in the mind and that appropriate

49 *The World,* 27 November 1973, 2.

50 Cited in Kavanagh, *South African People's Plays,* 65.

culture was inherently political. First SASO and BPC's lawyers called an expert "on ethnic nationalism in South Africa" who testified that "far from being 'relevant' [*Shanti*] is about the political and ideological belly-gazing of three young intellectuals;" and, students' claims aside, in his expert opinion, it was highly unlikely that such philosophical reflection could provoke a revolution. In their own testimony, the defendants pursued the other tack. Asked whether *Shanti* "showed the true meaning of Black Consciousness," Zithulele Cindi demurred; the play was hardly worth discussing, he suggested, because it "did not have the stage craft that is necessary, [nor] was [it] up to the standards in theatrical terms."[51] How could the play be revolutionary, he innocently told to the court, when it could hardly even be considered a play?

This defense was a strategy to fit the occasion; and evidence suggests that testimony like Cindi's did not reflect what activists actually believed. Indeed, before the charges were laid, Black Consciousness publications had hailed *Shanti*, as had *The World's* reviewer and the witnesses in the Molobi trial. The text's easily interpreted message, its declamatory action that functioned to publicize Black Consciousness thinking; its rigid adherence to Black

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51 HP AD1719 S. v. Saths Cooper et al, Reel 10, testimony of Dan O'Meara, 3 – 4; Reel 8, 7884. For more on the circumstances that structured this legal encounter, see Ch. 8.

Consciousness talk (if not the philosophy's as-yet-ill-defined political program) – all had been worthy of celebration. *Shanti* was no "apologetic" play, activists crowed; nor was it a "token protest play … that merely says we are oppressed and leaves it at that." Where township playwrites like Gibson Kente were deemed 'comical' and escapist, and protest theater like that of Athol Fugard were dismissed as intended for whites, activists deemed *Shanti* to be defiantly Black Consciousness. More than a play, PET concluded, it "gives positive direction to blacks."[52]

But what exactly was this direction? Was it towards armed struggle, as Thabo's trajectory suggested? The expert witness had charged Shezi's characters with irrelevant "navel-gazing," but, as we have seen, the intellectual history of the 1970s resounded with faith that navel-gazing was a radical activity. By the time PET and other groups staged *Shanti*, the popular notion of voice had evolved; no longer concerned with cultivating individuals' subjectivity towards indeterminate ends, Black Consciousness-infused popular culture instead offered itself as the articulate vanguard that represented the people's voice. In a critical moment in the play, Thabo is in prison, reflecting on his and his people's predicament. As Koos had done, he turns to face the audience and urges them: "Sing on, my Black

52 From a PET newsletter, undated, HP AD1719 S. v. Saths Cooper et al, Reel 10, annexure 9.

brothers, sing on … Speak up and demand an answer. Speak up and say your say. You faceless millions! Speak up, you images of God!"[53] Here Thabo spoke in Shezi's voice, in Black Theology's voice, in the voice of the *SASO Newsletter's* injunctions to speak. Cindi might not have found it good theater, nor, perhaps, would Freire have judged it appropriate conscientization, but interrupted by the ovations of a packed house, it was undoubtedly good politics.

In this way culture paced the progression from dialogic conscientization to didactic politicization, just as state incursions would help to transform nebulous Black Consciousness into a Movement that confronted the system. Theories of conscientization were rooted, like Black Consciousness itself, in the mellowed philosophies of the late 1960s; but by the early 1970s, the pot was beginning to seethe and culture delivered an althogether more strident response, one consumed with the problem of liberation. A mid-1970s high-school poet shared these concerns. "Conscientisation is my misson," he wrote, but that was only the beginning: "Bantustanism? That's praying for more oppression/White racism? I'm gonna squash that pretty soon … Black liberation is sure my goal/[a] free and just society will be the end-product."[54] Thought has occupied our attention for a while now, even

53 "Shanti," in Kavanagh, *South African People's Plays,* 77.

54 Thabo Molewa, "On Black Consciousness," undated, HP A2177 6.2.14.

as action has repeatedly threatened to take the stage. The twinned questions of conscientization and culture did not evolve in a vacuum; along the way they related to those who were confronted and converted, and those who could never be, to the aesthetic challenge of the now, and the political problem of the not yet. By the time security branch raids robbed *Shanti's* cast of their equipment, the time reserved for reflection was closing; the age of philosophers was nearly past and the age of politics ascendant.