Civility in Question: Cultural Debates in the Non-European Unity Movement.

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In 1937, the Cape Federation of Trades held a dance in Cape Town in celebration of May Day. Anxious to allay fears about the propriety of 'racial mixing', the *Cape Guardian* responded with a report which emphasised decorum: "The dance was not orgiastic at all." The single African who attended was "respectably attired in evening dress and spent the entire evening by the door" (15 May 1937: 4). Not long afterwards, *The Spark*, organ of the Workers' Party of South Africa (WPSA), published a reply:

> Good work! We now know that the Coloured persons even at a May Day dance behaved as Coloured persons should…Ah! But what about the dreaded Natives? …[The writer] emphasised that there was only one native present. That is some satisfaction. We can sleep more calmly now that we know that a horde of Natives did not descend on the dance and concert. But how was he dressed? Was he respectable? What did he do? All these are important questions. We must know, or the future of white South Africa trembles in the balance…Let [the dance organiser] tell us in his own words: 'He was in evening dress and was scrupulously correct throughout the proceedings. He did not dance and, as a matter of fact, stood at the door for most of the evening'. We breathe again. The Native knew where to stand – in his correct place. Even though he wore evening dress, which is surely the final criterion of respectability, he did not mingle. Quite right. Nobody knows the miscegenation that would have taken place if he had left his standing ground, his self-chosen position 'at the door'. (June 1937: 15)

This tongue-in-cheek aside in a little-known Trotskyist newspaper provides insight into one of the ways in which anti-colonial struggles take shape as an argument about culture. The scornful send-up of bourgeois 'respectability', the privileging of British cultural norms and the conflation of 'blackness' with the uncivilised/erotic touches on a site of particular intensity in anti-colonial struggles in the Western Cape in the early twentieth century. A central disagreement in the politics of the period concerned the strategy of assimilation and the pursuit of political rights through the conspicuous demonstration of

decorum and the performance of a 'civilised self'. In its concerns with respectability and its characteristically mocking tone, *The Spark* offers a coded response to some of the tensions between residual and emergent forms of political engagement – those of an older generation imbued with the principles of courtesy and conciliation and those of a younger generation favouring more direct and outspoken modes of opposition. In the struggles between 'moderates' and 'radicals', culture enters the scene of politics in two, inter-linked ways: first in the form of a dispute about appropriate political conduct and second in a disagreement about the value of 'assimilation'. Conflicts over political strategy thus take shape around the pivots of subjectivity and habitus, on the unexpected terrain of dress, demeanour, behaviour and speech.

The most vocal critics of the civilising objectives of a moderate Western Cape leadership were located within the Workers' Party of South Africa (WPSA) and the New Era Fellowship (NEF), both of which would later play a role within the federal structure of the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM), established in 1943. Accompanying this critique was a call for non-collaboration with all government institutions and an insistence on the solidarity of all the oppressed, principles which would lead ultimately to the NEUM's 'ten-point programme' of political demands (Lewis 1987: 181, 221). A major provocation for these groups came in the form of Prime Minister Hertzog's decision to remove the Cape African franchise. For those in the WPSA, the subsequent acceptance by the leaders of the All African Convention (AAC) of the concession of Native Representative Councils as a replacement for the vote was nothing short of betrayal. Their sense of outrage was particularly acute since the AAC had been established specifically to challenge the Hertzog Bills and therein lay the only hope of redress. According to *The Spark*, there were no words strong enough to condemn this "servile crawling on the belly." "What can we do but wash our hands in disgust?" (*The Spark* vol 2.2 February 1936: 3). In the Western Cape, arguments about appropriate forms of political engagement and the accumulation of cultural capital – fuelled

by the radical intellectuals in the NEF and the WPSA – took on an especially volatile character in organisations such as the African Political Organisation (APO) and the Teachers' League of South Africa (TLSA) both of which had an exclusively coloured membership. In both cases, too, they were resolvable only through the formation of breakaway groups. From 1943 onwards, the struggles over respectability and strategy shifted slightly to the NEUM and the Anti-CAD, a group which was established to contest the removal of the coloured franchise.[1]

This chapter focuses on the debates around political conduct and civilised aspiration which emerged from within the circles of the WPSA and the NEF from the late 1930s onwards and explores their later manifestations in the TLSA and the NEUM (and their publications, *The Educational Journal* and *The Torch*). The chapter begins by establishing some of the parameters of the moderate position as it was articulated in *The Educational Journal* (until its take-over by radicals in 1943) and in the newspapers *The Sun* and *The Cape Standard*. It then goes on to explore the arguments of the radicals, paying special attention to the multiple points at which the fields of culture and politics interconnect. In this particular example of South African anti-colonial struggle and 'liberation theory', the manifold entanglements of culture and politics occur not only in contested styles of political engagement and the objectives of civility but also in theories about the social function of colonial education and in claims for cultural access and inclusion. Of special interest also is the way in which political struggles come to be elaborated on the ground of literature and the reading of texts.

The fact that many of these struggles tend to take most prominent form within coloured organisations inevitably skews the discussion towards the specifics of coloured politics, identity and experience. In this emphasis lies the danger not only of reifying coloured identity but also of corroborating the mistaken view that the NEF and the NEUM were organisations of exclusively coloured membership, confined to the Western Cape. In an effort to avoid these

mis-constructions, I attempt to remain sensitive to the decisive influence of particular historical identities (Wicomb 1998; Erasmus 2001) while also reading these debates as an especially productive instance of a much more widespread phenomenon.

Equal rights for civilised men

Writing about the discourse of race in South Africa in the early twentieth century, Saul Dubow points to a "distinct ideological shift in the late nineteenth-century Cape" when a failed liberal integrationism was gradually superseded by a philosophy of segregation (1987: 73; 1989: 7-8). Victorian assumptions of human perfectibility and racial advancement which posited the gradual assimilation of 'non-Europeans' into the dominant culture gave way to an obsession with 'racial stocks', a fear of racial 'mixing', and new segregationist policies encouraged by the pseudo-science of eugenics which sought to preserve racial 'purity' (and 'cultural difference') by limiting 'interracial contact' as much as possible. Whilst originally conceived as a compromise between the discredited policies of assimilation and repression, segregationist thinking did not actually constitute a rejection of the central assumptions of these two schools of thought. Rather, as "a synthesis of divergent political traditions…the discourse of segregation…continued to carry within its terms resonances of those very elements which it professed to reject" (74). The unstable combination of these distinct but overlapping racial philosophies provided the ambiguous ground on which oppressed groups in South Africa attempted to formulate a political strategy in the early twentieth century. For those classified as 'coloured', the situation was further complicated both by their marginal status within the broader South African polity, and by the way in which they were treated by successive white governments, at times courted and embraced as part of the 'European' community, but also just as easily shunned (Lewis 1987; Adhikari 1993).

The strategy favoured by political elites in the 1920s and 30s – such as D.D.T Jabavu of the All African Convention (AAC) and Abdullah Abdurahman of the African People's Organisation (APO) – was one which, in sympathy with the Victorian 'civilising mission', sought gradual incorporation into the dominant political and economic order through careful assimilation to the standards of a 'superior' European civilisation. As Neville Alexander observes, the "politics of almost the entire black leadership of the first thirty years after Union can be said to have consisted in futile attempts to persuade the British crown and the local white ruling class that they were worthy of being incorporated into the established political order" (1986: 181). In the early twentieth century, then, anti-colonial challenge takes shape as a politics of persuasion, the conspicuous performance of 'civility', demonstrations of 'worthiness' and the demand that criteria of citizenship derive from merit rather than race. Evident in calls for "equal rights for all civilised men" (cited in Lewis 1987: 49) and the acceptance of the 'civilisation test', it was a strategy which seemed to acquiesce in evolutionary thinking as differential status and reward became the consequence of a kind of 'uneven development'.

Narratives of ascent, written into a framework of evolutionary progress, are also overlaid with the sympathetic trajectories of Christian renunciation, spiritual progress and redemption, all of which tend to confirm a barbarous past. In D.D.T. Jabavu's arguments against Hertzog's 'Native Bills' in 1927, for example, the political journey is imagined in the terms of a Bunyanesque pilgrimage. For Jabavu, the removal of the Cape African franchise

> would block the progress of those who wanted to advance and damn them back to the slough of ignorance...Every black man who is a voter has ipso facto abandoned the position of barbarism. We are ranged on the side of civilisation. Our interests are intertwined with civilised interests. We would not like to go back naked to the Kraals and live a barbarous life. We have renounced that life once and for all (cited in Dubow, 1989: 151).

Although the argument repeats a standard rhetorical conflation of barbarism and 'tradition' (spoken through the metonymies of

'nakedness' and the 'kraal'), there is also a canny acknowledgement that it is the franchise, rather than individual achievement, which forms the pre-eminent sign and guarantor of civilisation, without which all is lost.

By the mid-1930s, the ruling United Party Government – determined to pursue a policy of full-scale segregation – was paying only lip-service to assimilationist ideas; nevertheless, the conceptual link between human rights and the attainment of 'civilised' norms remained strong. Under the guidance of organisations such as the AAC, the APO and ANC, political leaders continued to put their faith in the potential rewards of assimilation. This strategy was located within a broader politics of appeasement founded on the tactics of negotiation, compromise and the seeking of incremental political 'reforms' and was buttressed by the arguments of the African-American scholar Booker T. Washington who emphasised 'self-help' and economic independence and privileged socio-economic advancement and self-improvement over direct action. It received additional support from powerful middle-class myths of individual achievement and the possibility of self-advancement through hard work, sobriety and thrift. Something of the characteristic rhetorical gestures of this position, still influential in 1945, is suggested in the inaugural address to the Coloured People's Union (CPNU):

> [The CPNU aims to] improve the existing economic, social, educational and political conditions of the Coloured people by means of closer understanding with the Government [and] to assist in the Coloured man's attempt to better himself in all spheres of life….One of the cardinal points in our policy is that we are organised on a Christian basis. Tolerance, forbearance, charity, the principle of self-help, building up of economic strength through our own efforts, by encouraging our people to be thrifty and diligent, and faith in ourselves, forms the foundation on which we have started to work. (*Sun* 8 July 1945: 2)[2]

Despite the dominance in this early-twentieth century discourse of the racially-defined minutiae of social Darwinism, what this slow and painful journey from 'barbarism' to 'civilisation' meant in practical terms was the taking on of a particular class identity. In other words,

to become civilised was to become middle-class. In *Rabelais and His World*, Michael Bakhtin (1984) notes how in sixteenth-century Europe, 'upper body functions' like reason, delicacy, and refinement become the distinctive markers of an emergent middle-class subjectivity. What this tended to produce was an implicit categorizing of human behaviours and preferences, so that a taste for 'High Culture' or an avoidance of 'excess' or 'vulgarity' became the visible signs of a more civilized sensibility and, as a powerful mechanism of class distinction and differentiation, an effective way of ensuring the continued hegemony of the ruling class. Taking up the implications of this argument for a more contemporary example, Laura Kipnis draws attention to the way in which the opposition between high and low discourses, high and low classes, and high and low culture is "enforced and reproduced" in the interests of "a class hierarchy tenuously held in place through symbolic (and less symbolic) policing" of the threats posed by the lower orders. "The very highness of high culture", she argues, "is structured through the obsessive banishment of the low, and through the labour of suppressing the grotesque body…in favour of what Bakhtin refers to as the 'classical body'" (2001: 137).

In South Africa in the 1930s and 40s, a similar constellation of attitudes, tastes and behaviours functioned as the naturalized, arbitrary signifiers of a privileged (white) middle-class subjectivity, and marked the boundary between those deemed acceptable or 'civilized' and those who were not. Educated elites in the Western Cape in the 1930s and 40s embraced the logic of class and race hierarchy in the interests of their own survival, and sought a remedy for discrimination in the cultivation and conspicuous demonstration of middle-class manners, tastes and values. In Bakhtin's terms, in their quest for the basic human rights of political representation and freedom from want, political leaders had little choice but to adopt those behaviours which had come to signify an elite status.

For those classified as 'coloured', the usual problems of an 'uncivilised' or 'backward' people were exacerbated by a peculiar

racial discourse in which ‘mixed blood’ had become synonymous with moral degeneracy and ‘shame’ (Coetzee 1988). An example of racial aberration, a horrifying act against nature, the children of ‘miscegenation’ were regarded as constitutionally flawed and hence morally degenerate in a way in which African or Indian people never were. Consequently, a political strategy which sought a place for coloured people in the dominant order had to confront the basic problem of a people who were regarded as intrinsically aberrant, compromised in some unspeakable way.[3] A ‘race’ with ‘a taint in the blood’ could find respectability only by means of a severe moral and social re-education, part of which entailed the uncompromising adherence to a strict moral code.[4]

Like many others, the coloured elite based their hopes on the route of civilised aspiration on the basis of the historical record. According to Mohammed Adhikari,

> They looked back to the introduction of liberal policies under British rule as the start of the coloured people’s ascent from a dark past of savagery and slavery. The repeal in 1828 of the vagrancy laws that had virtually enserfed the Khoisan, and the emancipation of slaves in 1834, were taken to mark the start of the coloured people’s “rise in the scale of civilisation”. Politicised coloureds regarded the establishment of the principle of equality before the law and the introduction of a non-racial franchise in 1853 as forming a watershed in the development of the coloured people because it bestowed basic civil rights upon them and provided a means for their incorporation into the mainstream. (1993: 15)

In this regard, coloured leaders in the Western Cape in particular, directed considerable energy towards a broad project of moral and social ‘improvement’ and education in conformity with Western middle-class norms. For Dr Abdurahman, respected community leader and president of the APO from 1902 to 1940, it was education which would provide the key to cultural, economic and political ‘upliftment’ (Adhikari 1993: 25). The TLSA, established in 1913 under his guidance, was closely identified with these aims, as was its monthly publication, *The Educational Journal*.[5] The demand for visible ‘progress’ and ‘advancement’ took on a particular intensity in the face of dominant (white) opinion which could see little of value in a ‘backward race’, a

group of people viewed as “little better than an aggregate of immoral, or at best, amoral creatures addicted to drink, dagga and dice” (*Sun* 25 October 1940: 3). The destructive weight of such opinions resulted in a painful rhetorical stance: as one writer puts it, “we cannot contend that we are a community of saints, but we can justifiably maintain that as a group we have made creditable headway in the face of discouragement and insidious opposition” (*Sun* 25 October 1940: 3). Whilst asserting the right to fair and equal treatment on the basis of humanist ideals of equality and reciprocity, community leaders were also induced to collaborate with a dominant framework of racial hierarchy (*Sun* 25 October 1940: 3). This kind of contorted response is evident in local Cape Town personality George Golding’s repeated requests to government that “the ‘better class’ of coloureds…who had ‘reached the stage of development which is on a par with that of the average European’, could be admitted to ‘European status’” (cited in Lewis 1987: 238).[6] The reiteration of class difference was accompanied by those of race as careful distinctions were maintained between coloureds and the “semi-civilized blanketed Natives from the reserves” (*Coloured Opinion* 20 May 1944: 1-2).[7] The prevailing rhetoric of advancement, in which change is imagined largely in economic and political terms, is nevertheless easily collapsed into more troubling narratives of racial hierarchy and human evolution.

For many of the political elite in the Western Cape, the rhetoric and practice of protest itself were seen as key areas in which to demonstrate the kind of moral and social propriety and ‘good breeding’ which would mark their distinction from the ‘lower orders’. For this reason, they placed great emphasis on outward postures of dignity, politeness and adherence to the law, even in the face of intensifying racism and repression. In the wake of the Rand Revolt of 1922, community elites drew attention to the anarchic, violent, and irrational behaviour of white mine workers in order to show up their own far more respectable and law-abiding politics (Adhikari 1993). In the Teachers’ League in particular, described by one commentator as

an “organisation of snobs” (*Educational Journal* May-June 1950: 14), decorous conduct, solemnity, restraint, moderation, and self-control – many of the attributes of what could be described as the ‘ideal’ British subject – “were amongst the most highly-valued behavioural traits” (Adhikari 1993: 98). It is for this reason also that community leaders in the mid-1940s responded with such energy to the ‘uncivilised’ behaviour of the emerging radical bloc who demonstrated a resistant stance both in the content of their politics and its form.

Radical ideas amongst black South Africans had been gaining ground since the mid-1930s. Intensified by the events of the Spanish Civil War and the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1936,[8] they were given further impetus in the same year by the government’s successful attempt to secure the two-thirds majority necessary to introduce the Hertzog Bills that would deprive Africans in the Cape of the right to vote.[9] Aside from widespread poverty, unemployment and malnutrition (highlighted by the findings of the Wilcox Commission in 1938), those living in the Western Cape also began to feel the impact of a new set of segregation laws which restricted employment. For those feeling frustrated with the ‘cap-in-hand’ methods of the APO, new groups like the National Liberation League (NLL), the New Era Fellowship (NEF) and the Non-European United Front (NEUF) were the principle channels for a new popular radicalism Lewis (1987: 184-198). Of even greater import for coloured South Africans was the announcement in 1943 of the government’s plan to form a separate Coloured Affairs Department. This single issue had an overwhelming impact in the Western Cape, bringing to a head incipie0nt tensions and dividing communities irrevocably (February 1983; Lewis 1987; Adhikari 1993; Drew 2001). In February of that year, the NEF launched the Anti-Coloured Affairs Department Committee or Anti-CAD. In the Teachers’ League, antagonisms which had surfaced in the late 1930s finally split the organisation in two resulting in the formation of the Teachers Educational and Professional League (TEPA) which answered to the needs of the moderates.

In the unsettling days of the Teachers' League split, the growing antipathy towards this new radicalism was argued as much on the grounds of political strategy as it was on the basis of 'good manners'. Those who espoused a moderate position were particularly sensitive to the way in which the debate was conducted: according to one observer, the young radicals shout "as though they are on the verge of a nervous breakdown"; their lack of decorum is "the way to debase and not to raise our people" (*Educational Journal* May 1943: 7). Instead, moderate leaders vowed to "fight with determination…without causing friction between the Coloured and any other section of the people" (*Coloured Opinion* 20 April 1944: 1). These concerns with the "etiquette of struggle" (*The Sun* 22 November 1940: 3) reiterate an earlier scene of conflict between the moderate leaders of the African National Native Congress and a group of "black Bolsheviks" who descended on a meeting in Bloemfontein in 1919. The President of Congress, of Sol T. Plaatje, recorded his impressions in a letter to the De Beers Mining Company: "The ten Transvaal delegates came to Congress with a concord and determination that was perfectly astounding to our customary native demeanour at conferences. They spoke almost in unison, in short sentences, nearly all of which began and ended with the word 'strike'" (cited in Willan 1978: 206). In this case, the unexpected entry of the political 'uncouth' into the previously cordial and demure is reflected not only in unanimity and shouting but also in syntax.

"Al dra 'n aap 'n goue ring/hy bly maar net 'n lelike ding"[10]

It was with the exaggerated performance of civility and middle-class manners and the seeming acquiescence to class hierarchy and that a younger generation of activists took such exception. By accepting the 'civilisation test', the moderates had compromised the liberation struggle, destroyed the solidarity of the oppressed, and isolated themselves from the working class. They were prepared to accept (or at least manipulate) the arbitrary racial classifications handed down by

a state which employed divide-and-rule tactics in order to dissipate black resistance. It was a political strategy which produced damaging class distinctions within oppressed groups (many of which were tied to equally insidious racist privileging of 'lighter' skin) and had done nothing to advance their cause. To use the language of the day, they were 'quislings', 'sell-outs', 'time-servers' and 'collaborators'. Instead of co-operation with the government in the hopes of piece-meal reform, radical intellectuals put their faith in solidarity with the oppressed. In this instance, anti-colonial opposition tends to predominate as a form of cultural resistance, directed both within, to the internal dynamics of anti-colonial movements themselves, and externally to various forms of cultural or symbolic domination characteristic of colonial-capitalism and the privileged orders of knowing and valuing upon which colonial rule depends.

The political struggles which this criticism unleashed was often characterised as a rebellion of "youthful upstarts" against their elders. But as Ben Kies observed (writing under the pseudonym, I.N. Fandum), it was not because of their "greying locks" that older leaders faced such opposition from the youth but because of the "twilight of their ideas" (*The Sun* 19 September 1941: 3). Kies, a young teacher at Trafalgar High Shool, was one of the principle authors of this protest.[11] Others in the group included Dr Goolam Gool, Willem van Schoor, Jane Gool, A.C. Jordan, Edgar Maurice, Hosea Jaffe, Enid Williams, R.O. Dudley and Kenny Jordaan. In an attempt to account for the substantial differences in political opinion which characterised the two groups, Gavin Lewis points to the shaping forces of material context. The older generation, educated in mission schools, continued to place its faith in the promises offered by the Cape liberal tradition. For the younger generation, the impact of a much harsher socio-economic climate and clear signs of government hypocrisy led to growing disillusionment which tended to be expressed within the terms made available by a new anti-imperialist ideology (1987: 208). Described by Bill Nasson as a "politically alert and articulate coterie of sharp petty-bourgeois

radicals" (1990: 195), these individuals provided the intellectual leadership for the emerging radical bloc, and were largely responsible for developing its programme of action. Sarah Mokone (pseudonym for Victor Wessels), writing in *The Educational Journal* many years later, is at pains to emphasise the location of these intellectuals within a broader radical milieu (possibility in reaction to later charges of elitism): "[t]hey were not freaks born out of their time but a vanguard articulating an awareness and a mood that was already widely felt and was growing, even though as 1942 came to an end, passivity and demoralisation seemed to hold the political organisations of the oppressed, such as they were, in a choking grip" (1978: 61).

As the organization most representative of the opinions of the professional classes, the Teachers' League of South Africa (TLSA) was the obvious target for this growing dissent. In a 1938 address to the NEF entitled "The Revolt of Youth", Ben Kies laid out the key arguments of the radicals' position: "Defeatism and despair", he began, are "not necessarily the unanimous characteristics of the present day Coloured man, despite the assertions of the novelist Sarah Gertrude Millin, the statements of the Coloured Commission Report, and the tacit admittance of all the Coloured leaders". Arguing that the TLSA had pursued its "gentlemanly" fight for "petty" educational reforms "with a patience hitherto associated with angels and certain dumb animals", he pointed to a growing class divide: "More than anything'", he argued, "[what] is dividing the teacher from his people is his spurious cult of respectability. His pride in his profession and his new-found dignity and culture make him ashamed of [the] rough, untutored parents who made his education possible" (*Cape Standard* 7 June 1938: 9).

Kies' arguments, developed over a number of years in various forums,[12] were all lessons in futility in which assumptions about the rewards of civilised performance and the accumulation of cultural capital were subjected to relentless ironising critique. As he quipped in his address to the NEF, "the Administrator, Mr J.H. Conradie, forgot the

respectable Coloured man…when he drafted the Segregation Ordinance" (*Cape Standard* 7 June 1938: 9). It was time for a reassessment of the theory "that an 'educated' man by virtue of the fact that he [was educated] would prove to the rulers of the land that he was worth more than a kick in the pants and an inferior place in the country's affairs, and that – automatically – economic, social and cultural improvement would be extended to the community". "Will [education] stay or even temporise the heavy, grasping hand of aggression? Of course it will not" (17 January 1941: 3). Far from assisting the political emancipation of oppressed groups, education had only produced the physical health and discipline necessary for successful servitude, "turning out a regular supply of 'wages slaves'" (*Cape Standard* 7 June 1938: 9).

Attacks on the Teachers' League were particularly sharp, directed mainly towards its snobbish preoccupations with middle-class (British) values, its reformist political aims and its characteristic postures of cringing abjection: The Teachers' League "spen[ds] all its energy and resources chasing crumbs….We have got used to being down on all fours, searching for strays, and we have not yet stood up on our own hind legs, as almost everyone has been in the habit of doing since Neanderthal set the fashion" (*Sun* 13 June 1941: 3). In conflating an obsequious politics with a narrative of human evolution, Kies also takes issue with the Darwinian values on which the League position implicitly depended. In another example, the TLSA is described as

> the most reactionary group of Coloured people existent today. Theoretically, it frowns upon politics, but, actually it is the bulwark of conservatism, the Holy Defender of the defeatist slogan 'Alles sal regkom', the glorifier of 'culture', 'respectability' – ie. dressing well and never doing 'what is just not done, what', degree worship, reverence for all those who, irrespective of their utility, are able to reach the age of fifty five or more, the subtlest exponent of the art of agreeing with both sides at once, and the pleasing of everyone, the greatest friend and admirer of the churches, the self-appointed policeman and Lord High Executioner in the realm of ideas. (*Sun* 18 July 1941: 3)

Similar preoccupations with the acceptance of inferiority and the acquiescence in narratives of racial 'progress' are also evident in a later discussion of "Colouredism", defined as a "state of chronic expectation" in which people wait patiently to be declared "fully human". Taught to "regard themselves as a sort of fifth rib of Homo Herrenvolkensis", coloured leaders place their faith in a respectable politics in the hope that it would eventually lead to "the opening of the wicket gate" to an enhanced political status (*Educational Journal* August 1956: 20). Interpolating Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* by means of the wicket gate, Kies also takes issue with an equally damaging construction in which racial advancement becomes intertwined with a Christian teleology of sin and redemption.

Articles and discussions during this period articulate a particular sense of outrage against the snobbishness, 'white-mindedness' and self-absorption of political elites in the Western Cape. Communist Party member, Harry Snitcher, summed up the general mood in a debate between the NEF and the Cape Literary Debating Society held in District Six in November 1938. Responding to the question, "Are Non-European intellectuals pulling their weight in the community?", he railed against the moderate leadership: too "sophisticated" and "respectable" to come down to the masses, they "lik[ed] to toady to the European", and scrupulously avoided any meaningful political action in the hopes of remaining "popular with the Europeans and the white press" (*Cape Standard* 8 November 1937: 1). For Dr Goolam Gool from the NEF, 'non-European' intellectuals who had actually "come from the working class" had "completely isolated themselves from the community", failing to address even the most basic community needs (*Cape Standard* 8 November 1937: 1).[13]

The Torch newspaper (mouthpiece of the NEUM) adopted a similar position towards the coloured elite whom they mockingly gave the term "human zebras" (*Torch* 19 January 1948: 4). Regular columnist 'Roamer', for example, attacked the greed and subservience of "the Coloured aristocrat or snob" who, "pot-bellied" and "cigar-

smoking", is either collecting slum-rent, trying to slip in at a 'white' cinema or standing at the kitchen-door of some Government authority" (22 July 1946: 4). Roamer also attacked a general political conservatism and a sense of disdainful patronage directed towards the so-called 'uncultured' and 'uncivilised' sections of the "Non-Europeans". This "might appeal to the play-whites who, beplastered with pancake make-up and metamorphosa creams, queue up regularly at the Alhambra and Colosseum", but is anathema to "the toiling masses" who have committed themselves to a unified, non-racial struggle (*Torch* 19 January 1948: 4).

In contrast to the – inevitably self-defeating – "cult of respectability" which implicitly supported the damaging race and class discriminations of the dominant order, NEF intellectuals concentrated on developing a culture of resistance, a key element of which was the promotion of a critical education which actively opposed rather than sought accommodation with ruling class ideas and values. As Kies argued in his 1938 address to the NEF, "the educated and comparatively leisured classes of Coloureds should first read". They should "study history", make "objective analyses" and, above all, avoid the uncritical acceptance of conventional wisdom, looking "with as much suspicion upon a University Professor or a Bishop, as upon a parade monger". The aim of this education was explicitly political: to combat 'mental slavery' and "muddled thinking" and to "break down the many barriers within our own ranks" (*Cape Standard* 7 June 1938: 9).

Here, in brief, are set out what would become the basic political and educational aims of the Non-European Unity Movement which, in the years that followed, concentrated on nurturing a critical, independent and enlightened black intelligentsia which would act as a vanguard for the developing liberation movement. The "Teacher as Vanguard Thesis" as it became known was always understood as a first step in a gradual process of radical social change. Like many others in the movement, Kies prioritized careful planning and

theoretical preparation over spontaneous mass-activism, which he and others tended to characterize as ‘adventurist’ and likely to result in unnecessary bloodshed rather than social transformation (Nasson 1990: 193). Drawing on the historic example of the role played by the intelligentsia in liberation struggles around the world, particularly in the French and Russian Revolutions, NEUM intellectuals argued that the black intelligentsia in particular had a decisive part to play in the development of an “emancipatory theory” and in “practical leadership” in South Africa (cited in Drew 1997: 53).

The NEUM’s position as part of a relatively more leisured class, which was nevertheless excluded from any real social power, meant that it was more likely to question the social order in which it had, and did not have, a place. The workers, “exhausted and bowed down by arduous toil”, did not have the time or resources to examine the causes of their oppression. As those who “had sprung straight from the loins of the working class”, they also had the moral authority to provide leadership to a politically backward and illiterate proletariat (Drew 1997: 53). This close union, according to Enid Williams writing in *The Educational Journal*, also meant that the working classes would exert a necessary check on its activities and ideas (1944: 10). However, as Bill Nasson (1990), Linda Chisholm (1991) and others have argued, the dialectic which they anticipated between intellectual leadership and working-class ‘discipline’ which drew from classic left-wing theory nevertheless proved difficult to realise. According to Allison Drew, the early positioning of NEUM intellectuals as “very much an organic part of the working class” shifted into the more complacent and elitist politics of a petit-bourgeois class increasingly remote from working-class concerns (1997: 15).

As these comments suggest, NEF/NEUM intellectuals placed emphasis on a critical education as part of a broader liberation strategy. In contrast to the arguments of the moderates, however, education was always understood as the first stage towards emancipation rather than as a means of racial ‘improvement’ or a

remedy for social ills. Education was not about 'civilising barbarians', the inculcation of middle-class values or the development of 'character'. Neither was it the means whereby a subjugated class would eventually take its rightful place in a democracy of which it had finally proved itself worthy. As has been suggested, the argument that a demonstrable middle-class respectability would automatically lead to full political and economic integration was regarded as deeply flawed.

Arguments about political conduct, civilising objectives and the function of education resurface in a more explicitly literary form in A.C. Jordan's opening address at the 1946 Conference of the Teachers' League of South Africa (which was published in *The Educational Journal*). At the time, Jordan was President of the Cape African Teachers' Association (CATA), an influential affiliate of the NEUM.[14] Jordan takes up the theme of political strategy and the value of civilised aspiration in an elaborate allegory about the animal kingdom and the 'law of the jungle'. He specifically addresses coloured politics in his warning about the "method of the chameleon" (cautious, silent, sly), an argument which targets those whose political survival has come to depend on "using their near-white colour as grounds for demanding human rights". Jordan continues his critique of the ingratiating tactics of educated elites in another cautionary tale designed to strip Western education of its customary gloss. Jordan's argument reveals some of the contradictions of assimilationist discourse where Western civilisation is held up an object of aspiration and simultaneously withdrawn: "Europeans are prepared to give us a maximum share of the evils of Western civilisation and a minimum of its benefits, – in fact, just enough for their own convenience". To illustrate (illuminate) this point, Jordan turns to a reading of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*:

> If you want a clear picture of the situation in South Africa, you will get it in "The Tempest." Prospero taught Caliban just sufficient Italian to be able to order him to carry the logs of wood. He did not teach him reading and writing because Caliban's knowledge of these was no convenience to Prospero. It just suited Prospero that Caliban thought his master's magic powers lay in the books. All that Caliban could use

> Italian for was cursing, to which curses Prospero could afford to sit back and listen with the complacency of the elephant because they did not threaten his security. It was only when Caliban refused to obey orders that Ariel was sent to apply cramps, because Caliban's non-co-operation threatened Prospero's own security. To Prospero a Caliban remains a Caliban, and has no claim on his respect even if he rises above the level of the drunken butler and the drunken seaman when he hears music. Caliban is the son of Sycorax, the African witch; the drunken Italians, because they are Prospero's own countrymen,...are still better than Caliban (*Educational Journal* August 1946: 4).

In Jordan's reading, *The Tempest* reveals that Western knowledge is only grudgingly and partially apportioned in the interests of colonial rule; it also shows that its *primary* function in colonial contexts is to impel servitude through awe, a function which is wholly contingent on its status as proscribed object. The power of Prospero's books is dependent on their sheer presence, in the knowledge they are known to contain. The aura of Western knowledge is thus preserved through a combination of display and prohibition, of powerful presence and tantalising absence.

Caliban's Italian (allegorised as Western knowledge) gives him a language in which to curse. For Jordan, the interest of this dramatic moment lies in the contrast between the efficacy of Caliban's curses (which Prospero casually ignores) and his later refusal to obey orders which must be met by force. The implied 'lesson' to which Jordan implicitly appeals in this political address concerns the strategic value of (Caliban's) non-collaboration, an argument which slips easily into local political disputes about the dangers of collusion with government institutions. What is finally instructive in this play is the revelation of the futility of civilised aspiration, the assumption that participation in elite cultural forms could challenge notions of black inferiority and lead to economic advancement. That Caliban is capable of a sensitive appreciation of Prospero's music signifies nothing since Caliban will always be a caliban to Prospero.

Valued primarily for its didactic import, *The Tempest* is read as a play which unmasks the operations of colonial rule, reveals the ambiguous function of colonial education, and exposes the emptiness

of liberal promises that the performance of civility will lead to political rights. In what is in all probability the first African postcolonial reading of Shakespeare's play (Nixon 1987; Bowen 1993), *The Tempest* accrues new interpretive significance as a parable of colonialism, a play which reveals the intricate and oppressive dynamics of the colonial pact. Jordan's exclusive attention to the incidents and characters of the drama as well as the striking omission of any reference to Shakespeare himself suggests that, for Jordan, the epistemological value of the text is based not on the acceptance of a progressive authorial intention but rather from an understanding of the operations of textuality itself. The location of literary criticism in the thick of a political argument also has significance: the seamless shift from political rhetoric to literary analysis diminishes conventional distinctions between the two discursive modes and unsettles the privileged status of literary form.

Jordan's postcolonial Shakespeare is noteworthy not only because it foregrounds the play's colonial dimensions but also because of the difference it marks from the orthodox liberal-humanist readings of the 'guild'. As Jordan suggests, the endless preoccupation with 'character' and 'abstract moral truths' has blinded Western critics to the play's equal significance as a text of colonialism. Similarly, where liberal-humanist criticism distinguishes itself by meticulous attention to the lesson of Prospero's morality, it can see no immorality in Prospero's treatment of Caliban.

> In books of criticism, pages are devoted to the character of Prospero, and much is made of his "magnaminity", of his being generous to his enemies – the brother who betrayed him and usurped his dukedom, the drunken sailors who plotted with "this thing of darkness" to take his life. Yes, he does forgive his own countrymen; but he never forgives Caliban for being the son of Sycorax. (August 1946: 4)

Jordan's resistant reading thus operates on a number of levels: in its doubled status as both political rhetoric and critical exegesis, in its conscious refusal of the dominant norms of liberal-humanist interpretation, in its brazen reading of a classic text against the politics

of colonial rule and in its critique of colonial education and the politics of assimilation.

The concerns with the politics of education and its function in contexts of colonial rule continued to find an important place in expressions of political resistance during this period. In an article which appeared in *The New Teachers' Vision* – organ of the Cape African Teachers' Association (itself radicalised in the mid-1940s),[15] Jane Gool extends Jordan's discussion to include the function of education in metropolitan contexts. Beginning with the prohibition on education under slavery and feudalism, she points to the ways in which, from the Enlightenment period onwards, education became an essential element in the co-option and domestication of a potentially threatening majority. The same was true of present-day England, where an "educational system based on class differentiation" plays an important role in reinforcing and legitimising the existing class structure (December 1952: 15).[16] Similarly, in South Africa, education has a central place in the creation of a subservient labouring class. Writing some years earlier in *The Educational Journal*, E.E. Mason makes a similar point. Rather than encouraging a "spirit of unfettered, dispassionate enquiry", coloured schools foster "docility" and "meekness". "[R]egimentation is the key note of a system which prepares non-European children for a subordinate position in society….The last thing that is encouraged is clear thinking and independent judgement, for if applied they could upset the apple-cart and expose the rotten foundations of the system" (*Educational Journal* September 1944: 3). These sentiments, which were echoed by many African teachers (in publications like *New Teachers' Vision*), would only increase in the post-1948 period as the effects of a newly-minted Bantu Education policy under a new Nationalist government began to be felt.

As I have suggested, the recognition of the dominating functions of education and Western civilisation co-existed with competing views of its potential for empowerment and emancipation. What sets an

emancipatory education apart from oppressive colonial models is unrestricted access, a relationship to knowledge based on an authoritative 'reader' and a habit(us) of questioning and suspicion. It was on this basis that one of the other central political claims in this 'liberation theory' was made, namely a vigorous call for the right to participate in, and have full access to, the cultural products of Western societies. In political arguments, cultural alienation and exclusion are common themes. Criticising a government decision to ban several recent films including Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* and *The Grapes of Wrath,* Ben Kies writes that "[a]t the best of times, educational and intellectual life in Southern Africa might be compared to a dark and narrow cell. Inside that cell is another cell in which the aspiring non-European teacher and intellectual dwell and have their being" (*The Sun* 23 May 1941: 3).

Black claims for cultural inclusion combine moral arguments about "retarding human progress" with more vigorous demands based on human rights. Another approach, invoking reason against sentiment, contests patrimonial and essentialist views of culture based on descent and biological inheritance. A.C. Jordan's model of cultural transmission replaces relationships of 'filiation' and consanguinity with a principle of cultural acquisition based on affiliation and contiguity. In this reading, culture is imagined as free-floating and mobile rather than static or fixed, thus making it possible to unbundle the powerful, commonsense conflations of 'race', 'nation' and 'culture'. For Jordan, the concept of 'white' civilisation is "an absurdity of the first magnitude" (15). It is as if "this civilisation sprang out of the brain of the white man in the same way as the Goddess, Pallas Athene, sprang out of the brains of Zeus" (16). For us, he later continues, "Shakespeare does not represent his white skin. He represents human culture, and his contribution to culture is the legitimate right of all mankind" (*The New Teachers' Vision* 1950: 18). Central to this argument is the notion of cultural hybridity. Given the nature of its historical development culture cannot be identified with particular

racial groups, but should be understood as an amalgam of many contributing streams. In similar fashion, Kies attempts to disaggregate the English language from 'Englishness' – foregrounding English as a "world language" which is valued for the access it makes possible ("a language through which an oppressed man may contact people who will interpret his oppression") rather than for any specific attractions which might reside in English culture itself (*Sun* 1 August 1941: 3). Echoing W.B. du Bois, NEUM intellectuals resisted their interpellation as grateful recipients of the treasures of Western culture, instead claiming a position as legitimate heirs to a 'world culture' (Jordan 1950: 17).

The call that culture be made accessible to all South Africans was repeated time and time again in the pages of *The Educational Journal* and *The New Teacher's Vision*, becoming more urgent after the findings of the Tomlinson Commission into education were released in 1956 and the subsequent recommendation of separate education suited to the 'distinctive needs' of separate racial groups. Demands on the basis of human rights are also accompanied by pathos and the telling of many stories of frustrated ambition. An article which appeared in the Claremont newspaper, *The Citizen*,[17] for example, points to the "abundance of theatrical activity…amongst so-called Non-Europeans" all of which testify to "the tragedy of legitimate human aspirations frustrated at every turn. This "desperate band of people, caught up in their 'vaulting ambition', tried to scale the sheer cliffs of genuine artistic expression with bare hands. Heroic, yes, but productive of nothing but further frustration" (*Citizen* 30 July 1956: 9). An oppositional politics is also articulated (especially in the post-1948 period) in the stand against segregated cultural institutions and a critique of the discourse of 'cultural edification'. This was an argument which was taken up particularly in the newspaper *The Citizen*. Acting primarily as 'civilising' agents for a backward race, part of a ruling effort to co-opt and distract, segregated institutions entrench the dominant social relations of apartheid discrimination and confirm the

superiority of Western culture. Arguments of this kind were often directed at the Eoan Group, a cultural organisation with an exclusively coloured membership formed in 1934 by English-born Helen Southern-Holt. According to one writer from *The Citizen*, The Eoan was "befouled by an apartheid atmosphere"; it lent support to racial thinking through its humiliating preoccupations with the subtle gradations of skin colour and humiliating "pencil tests". Its readiness to participate in "apartheid festival[s]" at the very same time as "the Council was demanding the removal of so-called non-white residents from the area under the Group Areas Act" was particularly egregious (31 March 1956: 1).[18] The "most smarting humiliation to date", however, was the performance of *La Traviata* for "prominent South African racialists", which is likened to the annual "debasement" of coloured people during the New Year Coon Carnival celebrations in Cape Town:

> People who publicly spit in the faces of these artists, who are horrified at the very thought of sitting next to them in the same bus, or even standing in the same queue to buy a stamp, who at this very moment are trampling underfoot the last vestiges of their political rights, to these the Eoan Group are "thrilled" to give a special place of honour during the performance of "La Traviata"….The elegance and high artistic form merely substitutes for the capering and cavorting of the New Year revellers. The essence of coonery is still there for all to see – the voluntary self-abasement and degradation of an oppressed people for the pleasure of those who oppress, despise and insult them. (*Citizen* 3 March 1956: 2-3)

In the context of apartheid discrimination, the participation in segregated cultural events becomes a spectacle confirming inferiority. Like the annual 'Coon Carnival', it reinforces racist stereotypes of uncivilised, clowning coloureds.[19] A similar awareness of the way in which culture in South Africa was often implicated in the exercise of racial oppression is to be found in an incident which occurred when 'non-European' theatre-goers were refused entry to a 'whites only' screening of the 1949 film version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Students from Fort Hare University decided to boycott the film in protest. A *Torch* reporter summed it up in the following way:

> [T]he local educational authorities…applied all the usual forms of pressure inseparable from missionary institutions. This time, the

> sentimentality, the cajoling, the sermonising, the soul-stuff was heavily spiced with talk about cultural uplift and the chance-of-lifetime to see the immortal bard. The students were indeed sorry to have missed the film, but decided that the swallowing of an insult was too high a price to pay, even for Shakespeare. (30 May 1949: 3)

Politics and culture also intersect on the site of political rhetoric. Just as the moderates took issue with the aggressive and exaggerated speech of the "young upstarts", so too did the radicals express their resistance on the basis of 'moderate style'. According to Kies, sensitive to the politics of form, moderate politics take aesthetic form as verbosity, circumlocution and careful qualification:

> If Addison and Steele had been…interested in Coloured education, they might easily have produced this polished, priggish, carefully affected, long-winded, circumlocutory inflation, i.e., this accomplished feat of saying next to nothing and taking an age to say it. …[T]he views expressed are nearly always unashamedly reactionary; sometimes mystic and sentimental, often ambiguous to such an extent that you never know whether the writer is saying yes or no – indeed there are so many 'ifs' and 'buts' and 'all other things being equal,' and other supposedly non-committal qualifications, that you might jump to the idea that the writer's mind must be a junk-shop of cast-off ideas…then you would find that his last jump is towards the swamps of reaction and convention. The style is always the man. (*Sun* 6 June 1941: 3)

This critique of pompous style is also an exemplification, a stylistic performance in its own right. NEUM intellectuals, and Ben Kies in particular, became known for a particularly ebullient and expressive verbal style characterised by incessant word-play, parody, sardonic humour, sarcasm, hyperbole and the use of neologisms such as "Herrenvolk", "subjectify", "leader-goat", "beplaster" and "colouredise" (Nasson 1990: 197). This characteristic verbal extravagance was also achieved by strongly figurative language, highly imagistic and metonymic speech, unwieldy syntax and the rendering of affect through adjectival accretion and perambulation. Political discourse is also strongly marked by a habit of literary interpolation and citation in which contemporary events are read through the lens of classic texts, amongst which could be counted *The Cherry Orchard*, *Don Quixote*, *Nicholas Nickelby*, *Hamlet*, *Pied Piper*, *The Shepheardes Calender* (Spenser) as well as stories from Greek and

Roman mythology. This incessant literary quotation is evidence of a profound internalisation or habitation of the heritage of Western Imperialism (Spivak in Harasym, 1990: 72), already sedimented as a system of knowledge through which the world is named and seen. The particular combination of derision, playfulness and verbal excess registers an oppositional stance in the contrast it presents to the excessive formality of polite political engagement and speaks to the suppressed energies of frustrated resistance and the absurdities of late colonial rule.[20] This rhetorical discordance is also a striking example of linguistic appropriation and the deconstruction of dominant forms of knowing through aberrant style. The virtuoso performances of Western linguistic and cultural accomplishment, establishing both the bounds and bonds of an imagined political community, were in themselves an assertion of the claim to Western culture, an exemplification of both the "mastery of form" and "the deformation of mastery" (Baker, 1987: 15, 49) As instances of 'civilised display', however, there is little to distinguish these outward marks of cultural competence from the conscious performance of 'civility' which dominated the political agendas of aspirant community elites.

Resistant Pedagogies

As I have argued, NEUM activists poured their energies into the development of a radical educational programme as an antidote to the multiple discriminations of the emerging apartheid state. This home-grown, independent educational project, which tied a broad political and cultural education to the larger struggle against the state, achieved an influence out of all proportions to its tiny numbers (Nasson 1990: 200), and made an undeniable impression on the political and cultural landscape of the Western Cape. The beginnings of this radical pedagogy lie in the formation, in 1937, of the New Era Fellowship. The intellectual and philosophical groundwork laid in the discussion and debates of the NEF played a decisive role in the radicalisation of existing organisations like the AAC, the TLSA and the

CATA, as well as in the formation of new political groups like the Anti-CAD and the NEUM. “An open forum to ‘discuss everything under the sun’– South Africa’s Jacobin or Cordelier club” (Jaffe 1991: 14-15), the NEF was a “sorting house of ideas” (February 1983: 13) which offered a rare opportunity for social and intellectual exchange with people from diverse backgrounds and affiliations. According Kies, it was “an organisation where graduates, undergraduates, high school and college students, Native, Coloured and white [could meet] on an equal footing” (*Cape Standard* 7 June 1938: 9).[21]

The NEF operated on a number of levels. Monthly public lectures, discussions and debates, open to all, were held at the Stakesby Lewis Hostel in District Six. Lecture topics were wide-ranging, covering politics, education, literature, religion, anthropology, and science.[22] Invited speakers included Margaret Ballinger, Eddie Roux, Dora Taylor, Willem van Schoor, I.B. Tabata, Ben Kies, and University of Cape Town academics, J.G. Taylor, Benjamin Farrington, Lancelot Hogben and Frederick Bodmer, amongst many others. Those who showed promise in plenary discussions would be invited to participate in smaller study groups in which there was a deliberate – occasionally harrowing – induction into the politics and theory of the NEF. Richard Dudley, for example, described his own experience in the terms of “a baptism of fire”, as being “blooded into the movement”. According to Dudley, these individuals in turn established study groups in a number of local trade unions, where they taught the history of left-movements in other parts of the world (Interview, Cape Town 17 July 2002).[23]

With the establishment of the NEUM and the Anti-CAD in 1943, NEF activities were somewhat overshadowed. They were revived in the late 1940s after which, building on the success of the NEF, a number of similar groups were established all along the Cape Peninsula and around the country. These included the Cape Flats Educational Fellowship, the Langa Educational Fellowship, The Progressive Forum in Johannesburg and The South Peninsula Educational Fellowship, which took over from the NEF in the 1950s. Branches were also

established in Port Elizabeth and Kimberley (Drew 1991: 454). After its emergence in November 1943, the NEUM became the principal focus of the young radicals, with the now numerous fellowships continuing their function as "a sorting house of ideas", and a conduit for a new black intelligentsia which continued to influence local politics in the Western Cape.

Wide reading, exposure to radical ideas, and a holistic approach to knowledge were some of the key elements in the NEUM educational programme (Interview, with Richard Dudley, Cape Town 17 July 2002). The discursive modes of exposé and rigorous critique, applied in particular to "justificatory Imperial Histories" (Parry 1997: 4), relied on the application of a distinctive methodology which NEF radicals tended to describe as 'scientific', 'rational' or 'objective', and which looked for a hidden truth. In this way colonial conquest tends to be constructed primarily in discursive terms as ideological distortion and obfuscation. The response is not so much a question of 'writing back' to the centre as re-writing or 'unwriting' the imperial-colonial text for an audience at home. If colonialism can be understood in a discursive sense as an attempt to reduce a "landscape of competing frames of reference" to a single, commanding narrative (de Kock 2003), these writers counter with the assertion of an alternative view, with equal claims to a singular truth.

Hermeneutics

Cultural activities, including drama, were also a significant part of the NEUM's political pedagogy, encouraging the development of political consciousness, asserting the right to cultural participation, and providing an antidote to the dehumanising effects of a racist society (Interview, Norman Traub, Cape Town 26 January 2001). Key to this radical cultural project was the reading and discussion of literature. Writers like C.L.R. James, Leon Trotsky, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Earnest Hemingway, Lancelot Hogben, Ignazio Silone, George Bernard Shaw, Sinclair Lewis and John Steinbeck as well as Left Book Club selections and works from the Penguin

New writing series were widely read and discussed. That members were also encouraged to read the major Indian authors of the 1930s "Quit India" Campaign – Mulk Raj Anan (*Mother India*) Palme Dutt (*India Today*), K.S. Shelvankar (*The Problem of India*) and the writings of Pandit Nehru is one indication of the way in which local anti-colonial struggles were carefully elaborated within an internationalist frame.

A.C. Jordan pursued an allegorical reading of *The Tempes*t based on the idea of art as a form of 'truth-telling', one in which a Western inscription was made to speak to colonial experience. The work of criticism carried out in various forums of the NEUM testifies that this was not an idiosyncratic gesture, a unique moment of reading, but reflective of a wider critical practice based on a generalised hermeneutics of suspicion. Like Jordan's analysis of *The Tempest*, much of this criticism develops in antagonistic relationship to prevailing critical models. Thus a critic who appears only as 'J.M.', in *The Educational Journal*, offers an interpretation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* which eschews dominant critical models and makes a claim for the value of a "sociological" approach. 'J.M' takes issue with the "widespread intellectual and cultural climate of Western society which seeks to substitute ideal and transcendental conceptions for fruitful inductions from real situations". The "idealisation of literature as an absolute category" entails a negation of the text's social and psychological concerns. The objection to a moralising approach is also based on its claims to 'universality'. What appears as universal is in fact the expression of a very particular socio-historical complex, "sustained by an organised Church" and derived from "a particular form of society" (September 1950: 5).

On this basis, the text is approached as a meditation on absolute monarchy via a critique of the prevailing ethical standards of the Danish court. What is of interest to 'J.M' is that the play's political critique takes the form of a moral argument – the story of a 'good' prince locked in struggle against a corrupt Danish court. The materialist explanation J.M. provides for this moralising structure

concerns the historical possibilities and constraints of available discourse: “History had not yet created the intellectual criteria by which the full extent of the role of absolutism could be assessed, and so Shakespeare had to have recourse to such vague criteria which are generally subsumed under the term morality” (7).

The movement of criticism away from idealist protocols is also evident in ‘J.M.’s reading of the character, Claudius – approached not as ‘unique individual’ but as a symptomatic figure, representative of “an essential social disorder” (6). In a further elaboration of the argument, the sociological analysis is mapped onto that of Freudian psycho-analysis so that Hamlet’s moral protests against the corruptions of the Danish court are rewritten as a struggle between the ‘super-ego’ and the ‘id’. In this way, the play’s moral or political conflict is invested with the drama of a universalised psychic struggle. This creative, “centrifugal” criticism (Scholes, 1989) – pursued through a bold amalgam of two critical languages – simultaneously engages multiple textual potentials, thus approaching a kind of critical freedom, even flamboyance, not usually associated with an ideological approach.

The preoccupation amongst NEUM intellectuals with ways of reading – developed within a general structure of resistance to the guild – is also present in an argument specifically devoted to textual consumption itself. Against a traditional Leavisian requirement that the reader submit quietly to the aesthetic and moral ministrations of great literature, W. Gentle advocates an interrogative reading practice defined by a strong critical purpose, a careful “weighing and considering”. Gentle’s reader is granted an interpretive authority and a power of questioning denied by more traditional models in which the reader is encouraged to adopt the “reverential” attitude of “exegete before the sacred text” (Scholes 1985: 16). It also matters less what kind of text is consumed as the kind of critical disposition one adopts. In fact, as Gentle argues, the reader should “keep company with authors he dislikes for the tonic effect of their opposing intellect” since

it is not “acquiescence but conflict that produces mental activity” (*Educational Journal* April 1949: 5). Gentle’s arguments are an early reckoning with traditionalist criticism, prefiguring later concerns with habitus and the protocols of reading in the work of John Berger (1972), Stephen Greenblatt (1980) and Robert Scholes (1985). Scholes’ privileged hermeneutic – described as a “judicious attitude, scrupulous to understand, alert to probe for blind spots and hidden agendas, and, finally, critical, questioning, sceptical” (16) – is strikingly close to that of Gentle’s.

The literary critics who wrote regular book reviews for *The Torch* looked to literature as a means of illuminating the ‘truth’ of exploitative social relations: thus literary texts are deployed as a critical resource against the routine obfuscations and evasions of capitalist-colonialist societies. *Torch* reviewer, ‘A.I.’, for example, values Richard Wright’s *Native Son* for its detailed treatment of life in the Southern States and for its unmasking of “the rotten system of oppression, hatred and crime which is the culture of the South and which is allowed to continue unhampered in the ‘home of democracy’, the U.S.A.” (29 April 1946: 4). By contrast, Peter Abrahams’ *Song of the City* is “very thin stuff”, less useful because it romanticises South African life, and because of its superficial and, at times, naïve understanding of South African politics. “It is not with the poorly conceived story, or even the pedestrian style, that we have our chief disappointment in this novel. It is the lack of insight, of deep understanding. Peter Abrahams has not developed intellectually since the days when he used to flit in and out of the National Liberation League or read poems to the New Era Fellowship. He still gives the impression of being too much of a butterfly” (*Torch* 1 April 1946: 4).

In this particular community of reading, literary texts become the occasion of vigorous political argumentation and critique: literature is directly inserted into local struggles and invoked in on-going contests around political strategy. The critical discourse itself is thus marked by very specific political tensions, either between

'conservative' and 'radical' positions, or in relation to the differing political strategies of other organisations such as the ANC. Like Jordan's reading of *The Tempest*, many *Torch* reviews become enmeshed in an extended argument against the politics of 'collaboration' and 'reform'. So Jack London's *Iron Heel*, commended for its "brilliant social analysis", its acute understanding of Fascism, the worker's struggle and the ruthlessness of reactionary social forces, is praised for its exposé of the treachery of "the respectable middle classes". In what is another veiled attack on moderate politics in the Western Cape, 'A.I.' argues that the novel is an important lesson for South Africans to forge struggle alliances along class and not race lines: "In this country where the working-class struggle is camouflaged as a 'colour problem' a book like *The Iron Heel* brings home to us again the fact that the oppressed proletariat of all races and colours have the same battle to fight, and if we unite, we cannot fail to win" (*Torch* 20 May 1946: 4). In a review of Italian socialist writer Ignazio Silone, M. Gonnema bids "Farewell to Silone!" He has fallen from the great heights of *Fontamara*, "that classic of the liberation movement" (*Torch* 13 May 1946: 4), and sunk into mysticism and cynicism. For Gonnema, the "new Silone" sees the struggle against oppression as a "sacred mystery" and looks for religious solutions to political problems. The implications for South African politics are obvious: Silone's philosophy which advocates the "bread of sympathy and the wine of meekness" is dangerously out of place in colonial South Africa.

In similar fashion, literary criticism becomes a means of contesting alternative positions and groupings within the Left. In a review of Arturo Barea's autobiography of his experiences in the Russian Revolution, for example, the writer points to Stalin's betrayal of the revolution, and warns of the dangers of United Front tactics and Anarchism: both are misconceived because they "[reject] the class theory of the state, the class struggle and the dictatorship of the proletariat" (*Torch* 19 August 1946: 4). Phyllis Altman's *Law of the Vultures*, otherwise praised for its authenticity, comes under fire for its

endorsement of “black chauvinism”. For this reviewer, it is “very important to counter the thesis of this book in no uncertain terms” because of the existence of dangerous African Nationalist elements in the liberation struggle which threaten to do the movement irreparable harm (*Torch* 2 December 1952: 7).

Central to this reading strategy is a refusal of the dominant tendency in guild criticism to separate the world of ‘literature’ and the world of ‘politics’. *Torch* critics (and Unity Movement intellectuals more generally) advance an implicit argument for an understanding of literary texts as entangled with, and speaking to, particular historical contexts and social formations. In this way, the art object is flattened out, unravelled, dispersed, and made to mean within a wider socio-political and economic context. Against hegemonic aesthetic models, the text appears not as the transcendent object of a privileged Western canon but as just one of the many elements of a wider discursive and material field. This secular, heretical criticism comes close to Roland Barthes’ definition of reading as “a rewriting the text of the work within the text of our own lives” (cited in Scholes, 1989: 10). Moving outwards, unmoored from its originating, founding intentions, the text is continually opened up to “new possibilities of meaning” (Scholes, 1989: 8). These acts of creative appropriation, driven by the urgency of the political moment, are frequently read as forms of political dogmatism. However, as acts of continual ‘rewriting’, they might just as easily be assigned the values of individualism, iconoclasm and creative freedom.

What follows in the traditions of NEUM criticism is a radical interrogation of the cultural artefacts of a dominant culture, which, as Terry Eagleton (1981) has argued, form one of the primary sites upon which Western political hegemony is premised and sustained. Here, the kind of radical appropriation to be found in A.C. Jordan’s reading of *The Tempest* becomes an exemplary instance of this form of oppositional critical (and political) practice. Similarly, by approaching literature as a form of ideological inscription, NEUM intellectuals

sought to interrogate and expose the values of a dominant culture. Resistant criticism thus undercuts the prevailing emphasis in English teaching in South African schools (and universities) during this period on the contemplation of abstract moral truths over the particulars of history and politics (Orkin, 1987; Johnson, 1996). If hegemonic literary-critical modes can be linked to a broader project of establishing consent for an oppressive race and class-based order, *Torch* literary criticism aimed for exactly the opposite effect. In this regard, *Torch* reviews make no pretence at a kind of 'neutral' or apolitical literary apprehension: the pose of disinterested criticism falls away and the intricate connections between 'literature' and 'politics' are repeatedly inscribed. Socialist writing is mined for its political lessons, and reviews of US and European fiction make frequent reference to South African social and political concerns.

Like Dora Taylor, Unity Movement intellectuals combine a notion of literature as revelation with that of literary distortion. Literary distortion in South African literature pertains largely to the misrepresentation of pre-colonial and colonial histories and the reliance on racial stereotypes. According to one commentator, much of South African literature presents a "misshapen picture of man and his worth in the world" (*Educational Journal* July 1954: 4). Literature is regarded as one of the many technologies of oppression, "simply one of the implements with which the Herrenvolk work to keep the Non-Europeans mentally bound" (*Educational Journal* October 1954: 8). In *Torch*, the two writers charged with lending ideological support to apartheid oppression are Joy Packer (*Torch* 11 October 1955: 6) and Sarah Gertrude Millin. Millin's *King of the Bastards*, writes Joe Ka Nelani is an attempt to "vulgaris[e] the history of the African peoples" (*Torch* 24 April 1950: 6). Less obvious perhaps is the criticism of writers like Harold Bloom and Oliver Walker where ideological critique takes the form of a significant demonstration of English complicity in colonial and apartheid injustice. Harold Bloom's *Episode* – an excellent exposé of conditions in South African townships and the brutality of the South

African police – is weakened by its denial of the role of English-speaking South Africans in apartheid discrimination, and its failure to foreground the economic roots of South African racism (*Torch* 29 May 1956: 6). Oliver Walker's *Kaffirs are Lively* reveals a similar naiveté concerning English connivance in apartheid rule: "[Walker] works on the (old Cape Liberal) argument that the Afrikaners are mainly to blame for the state of things found in the Union today". The "English-speaking section of the white Herrenvolk are every whit as guilty". Their passivity is a "deliberate policy as part of the horse-deal made by British Imperialism after the Boer War" (*Torch* 2 August 1948: 7). Ideological critique also naturally extends to a concern with the politics of the image. Here the NEUM's internationalist political concerns are evident in their criticism of the negative representations of Indian people in school textbooks such as Henry Newbolt's classic collection *English Ballads* (1941) and the work of Rudyard Kipling (*Sun*, 30 August 1940: 3; 1 November 1940: 3). In the South African context, this also extends to a concern with stereotypical representations of 'non-white' characters in Afrikaans fiction and their role in entrenching black inferiority.

An extended argument in *Torch* about the merits of Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) stages another moment in the conflict between liberal-humanist criticism and an ideological approach. In the clash of opinions about this celebrated South African novel, two distinct critical languages are forced into an unprofitable collocation, revealing two incompatible methods of parsing the text. In a glowing review of Paton's novel, well-known Cape Town theatre director and teacher Isaac Pfaff commends the novel's humane vision and its moral critique of South African society: this is "easily the best English novel to come out of South Africa to date". Paton's novel reveals a "broadness of vision that raises him far above the average white South African" (*Torch* 27 September 1948: 5). Pfaff's comments provoked angry responses from *Torch* readers, all of whom condemned the novel's conservative politics, its "dope-peddling", its message of

Christian trusteeship and its “doctrine of brotherly love and changes of heart and the abhorrence of violence of any kind” (Letter to the Editor, *Torch* 11 October 1948: 11; Letter to the Editor, *Torch* 25 October 1948:5; Letter to the Editor, *Torch* 1 November 1948: 5). Against these criticisms, Pfaff advanced an argument about the proper work of criticism, insisting that its primary purpose is to seek out the moral imperatives of the text (the ‘tragedy of detribalisation’ and the need for brotherly love). In its moral concerns, art reveals suffering, generates pathos and encourages an empathic response. Key to this critical posture, as his comments reveal, is the construction of the text as pure art-object:

> But now the question arises whether *Cry, the Beloved Country* aims at being a revolutionary social tract, or whether it strives to give us an impression of the utter despair and frustration in which the detribalised African lives to-day. I hold that the latter is the case. *Cry, the Beloved Country* is essentially lyrical, a song of pain, a subdued song of subtle cadences and mournful strains, which must move the listener to a sympathetic mournfulness. This, and this alone, is Paton’s aim. (Letter to the Editor, *Torch* 1 November 1948: 5)

The distinction between moral lesson and political advocacy is held on the grounds that lyricism and song are inherently alien to ideology or politics. The novel’s moral vision, powerful as it is, must stop short of sermonising since art, as art, can have no political content. Thus the novel does not ‘advocate’ anything and cannot be judged on those grounds. Where Pfaff’’s reading consisted in a kind of moral acquiescence to the great lessons of literature, *Torch* readers foreground the politics of the text, exposing the bare inartistic structure of the text’s conservative ideology. Refusing the fiction of the ideologically neutral text (“all art is propaganda”), they exposed the disingenuous distinction between moral and political advocacy by locating the text’s ‘universal’ morality as a particular instance of South African liberalism.

In their refusal to celebrate the achievement of Paton’s novel, *Torch* readers also resisted established metropolitan evaluations, thus disrupting traditional circuits of cultural accreditation in which

metropolitan appraisals were given precedence over those of the colony (van der Vlies, 2007). As one respondent argued, “the fact that this is a bestseller in America and England is not in itself a guarantee of its worth” (*Torch* 1 November 1948: 5). The intensity of the debate and the levels of acrimony it generated bear witness to the enormous political and practical importance of literary judgements: as a result of this exchange, Pfaff’s political credentials were called into question and he was forced to publicly state his “political creed” (Letter to the Editor, *Torch* 6 December 1948: 5).

Conclusions

Culture and politics intersect in the intellectual traditions of the NEUM in the form of a counter-hegemonic intellectual project aimed at disrupting established ‘truth’, whether in the form of government propaganda, ‘common sense’ or academic knowledge. This treading on the corns – to use Bill Nasson’s phrase – of contemporary thought in South Africa (1990: 208) was part of a necessary ‘undoing’ of dominant orders of meaning, not for the sake of scholarship itself but in the interests of political emancipation. As an early form of post-colonial criticism, NEUM intellectuals sought to demystify the tenets of Western/imperial knowledge. These efforts to read South African history and culture against the grain resulted in a substantial body of texts, “a fecund deposit” (Nasson 1990: 195) which preceded the university-based tradition of left-wing historiography and literary criticism by at least thirty years, and established an important legacy of critical thinking. Pitted against various dominant constructions of the past” (Nasson 1990: 198), a radical historiography found a place for those marginalised and diminished by the colonial-apartheid state. A politicised literary criticism, on the other hand, initiated an important public debate and opened a space for subversive rewritings of the colonialist text. NEUM intellectuals contested the moral and ethical emphases of mainstream reading protocols with a critical discourse which paid attention to the material conditions of suffering and

exclusion in South Africa. By examining the “signs of empire” (Parry, 1997: 6), they offered an elaboration of the role of culture in the exercise of late colonial rule and challenged the norm of a transcendent ‘High Culture’ by drawing attention to the ideological function and material ‘situatedness’ of various forms of intellectual production and the race and class exclusions upon which they are based.

NEUM intellectuals traced the limits of Western modernity by revealing its complicities in colonial violence; they contested the notions of Western superiority and inherited culture and countered the cultural exclusions of the colonial-apartheid state with claims to a ‘world’ culture. They also challenged the colonialist principle that economic and political rights would be awarded upon the demonstration of a ‘civility’. Their attempts to democratise cultural access in South Africa resemble the kind of broad-based cultural projects forged under the auspices of the Communist-aligned Left Book Club, an important historical counterpoint to the largely elitist concerns of the guild. Loud, irreverent and ill-mannered, the emergent radical bloc demonstrated an oppositional ethos in their ‘uncivilized’ behaviour and through mockery, laughter and wit, they challenged middle-class seriousness and pretence.

What is also striking about this liberation theory is the confidence with which women (as writers and speakers) take up public discourse in a context overwhelmingly dominated by men. Here, the active participation of women like Jane Gool, Enid Williams and Joyce Meissenheimer (one of the editors of *The Torch*) would seem to confirm Richard Dudley’s view that women felt no difficulty in taking up public roles in the NEF and the NEUM (Interview, Cape Town 17 July 2002). Practical advances were also accompanied by efforts of theoretical elaboration. registering a precocious awareness out of kilter with his times, for example, Ben Kies offers an explanation for the usual dominance of men in political discussion and the effects of gender difference by illuminating the primary economic logic which

forces women to adopt postures of the “winsome and coy in order to persuade some egoistic brute to condescend to marry them – marriage being one of the few ‘careers’ open to our young women in this vulgar society in which we live” (*Sun* 19 September 1941: 3). Another argument elucidates women’s “double oppression” (his explanation actually points to a ‘triple oppression’, of class, race and gender) by drawing parallels between the oppression of “non-Europeans” and oppression of women and makes the point that the struggle against oppression does not guarantee a human rights culture (*Sun* 3 October 1941: 3).

As I have argued, at least one of the limits of this radical theory-making appears in the outward resemblance between cultural assertion as mastery of Western form and the civilising efforts of moderate elites. Another is that these radial arguments were increasingly enunciated within an institutional structure which, by the late 1940s, was tending more and more towards what Ciraj Rassool as described as a habit of paternalism and patronage authorised by a body of canonical texts leading to an increasing authoritarianism and intolerance of dissent (2004: 471). According to Rassool, a “massive initiative in public education” (2004: 443) was distilled into a fearful pedagogy of induction where deference to authority and the repetition of hallowed texts was privileged over an earlier spirited iconoclasm. This is not an uncontested view (Hassim, 2010) but one that must be reckoned with if the limits of resistant cultures are to be properly explored.

[1] This account complicates the political terrain set out in Leon de Kock's essay "Sitting for the Civilisation Test", preserving a resistant moment against generalised accounts of "seeming subservience" (de Kock 2001: 408).

[2] The CPNU was established in 1944 as a replacement for the APO after its take-over by more radical elements.

[3] Zoë Wicomb's (1998) argument concerning 'shame' as one of the defining features of coloured identity is apposite here, as is its fictional representation in her short story collection, *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987).

[4] As critics like Zimitri Erasmus (2001) and Cheryl Hendricks (2001) have argued, this moral policing was particularly directed at women.

[5] Founded and published in Cape Town in 1915, *The Educational Journal* was the official organ of the Teachers' League of South Africa. It was originally associated with the moderate politics of the African People's Organization, until its take-over by radical elements in 1943 after a split over the question of whether the League should be engaged in political activity (February 1983; Adhikari 1993).

[6] George Golding was headmaster of a local primary school, editor of *The Sun* newspaper and one-time Chair of the Coloured Advisory Council (CAC). In 1948, he took *The Torch* newspaper to court for defamation, and was awarded damages of £150 (Patterson 1953: 313).

[7] This phrase occurs in the context of an argument which rejects solidarity with oppressed African groups, arguing instead for the need to protect coloured interests from the threat of cheap African labour.

[8] The summary which follows is drawn from Gavin Lewis (1987), Vernon February (1983) and R. Van der Ross (1986). For details of this radicalization, see also Eddie and Win Roux (1970: 142) and Allison Drew (1991: 226-228).

[9] This was an achievement of the Fusion government or the South African United Party which was the outcome of a strategic union in 1934 between Smuts' South African Party and the National Party. Disaffected Nationalists formed a new party, the Purified National Party. See William Beinart (1994).

[10] This short verse appeared in an article by Ben Kies/I.N. Fandum (*The Sun* 9 August 1940: 3) and can be loosely translated as: "A monkey wearing a golden ring/Still remains an ugly thing".

[11] Ben Kies was born in 1917 in Cape Town. Active in the NEF, the Anti-CAD, the TLSA and the NEUM, he exerted an enormous intellectual influence in Unity Movement circles. He worked as a teacher at Trafalgar High but was banned from the teaching profession in 1956 because of his political views. He later became an advocate (Drew 1997: 155).

[12] His regular column in *The Sun* appeared between 1940 and 1941 under the pseudonym, I.N. Fandum.

[13] Christian Ziervogel of the Hyman Liberman Institute presented the case for the moderates, but was defeated 34 to 9.

[14] A.C. Jordan was born in Transkei in 1906. He was educated at St. John's College, Lovedale and Fort Hare. He received a PhD from the University of Cape Town in 1957 where he worked as lecturer in African languages until he went into exile in 1961. He was active in both the AAC and the NEUM (Drew 1997:165).

[15] *The New Teachers' Vision* ran from September 1934 to June 1956.

[16] Jane Gool was one of a number of formidable women intellectuals in the NEUM. Born in 1902, she graduated from Fort Hare University and became a teacher. She was an active member of the Workers' Party of South Africa, the AAC, the Anti-CAD and the NEUM; she went into exile in 1963 (Drew 1997: 156).

[17] *The Citizen* (March 1956 – May 1958) was the mouthpiece of the Cape Town-based Heatherly Civic Association, an organisation which was established by former members of the Trotskyist breakaway group, FIOSA. Cardiff Marney was editor. Other contributors included Christopher Mda, A.N. Stewart, Joseph Nkatlo and Kenneth Hendrickse (Van der Ross, 1986: 246; Hirson, 1995a: 86; Switzer and Switzer, 1979: 61).

[18] An article in *The Torch* is equally critical of the group's complicity with a conservative politics: "The Eoan Group will never develop into a real national theatre of all the people in South Africa while it behaves like a collection of puppets with the CAD pulling the strings" (31 January 1956: 5).

[19]Whilst conservative leaders saw the annual 'Coon Carnival' celebrations in Cape Town as a deeply embarrassing showcasing of racial 'backwardness', Unity Movement intellectuals stressed its humiliating and exploitative aspects. Neither group were able to see anything like creative (even subversive) self-expression in these carnival activities. For an example of such an approach, see Goolam Gool's article in *The Citizen* (24 September 1956: 1). For an

alternative view on the Carnival, see Jeppe (1990).
[20] For a parallel example, see Jeremny Cronin's comments on stylistic exuberance in the political rallies of the 1980s: Here, the "poetic thickening of language carries playfulness as well as implications of appropriation and nationalisation (1991: 298).
[21] This view was reiterated by Amelia Lewis, a primary school teacher and member of the NEF and the NEUM (Letter to the author, 5 November 2002).
[22] The first lecture at the NEF was on Imperialism, given by Willem van Schoor (Jaffe 1991: 15). Ben Kies gave two lectures on "Educational Segregation, 1652-1939" (*Sun* 9 February 1940:3) and Margaret Ballinger gave a talk on "Liberalism in South Africa". Peter Abrahams's lecture to the NEF, entitled "The Rise of the Negro Poets", was reported in *The Cape Standard* (31 January 1939:6). *The Cape Standard* also reported on the formation of the NEF Literary Circle on 24th May 1939: Ben Kies reviewed George Bernard Shaw's *Black Girl in Search of God* and Mr S. Stoddard discussed Sarah Gertrude Millin's *God's Stepchildren* (*Cape Standard* 16 May 1939: 9). Other lectures included Fred Carneson, V. Wessels, Cosmo Pieterse, Dora Taylor and Leonard Thompson.
[23] Richard Dudley taught at Livingstone High School from 1944 to 1984. He was a member of the NEF and later the NEUM and wrote a regular science column for *The Torch*.

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