

Volume, Power, Originality: Reassessing the Complexities of Soweto Poetry

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This article aims to reassess recent and continuing analyses of Soweto poetry that merely confirm it as a product and expression of a Black Consciousness vogue. Discussing works by Mongane Serote, Siphso Sepamla, James Matthews and Njabulo Ndebele, I argue that although Black Consciousness ideas of self-respect and self-assertion are unmistakably included, this canon is situated within a profoundly complex historical and social context. Adopting Steve Biko's alternative definition of a 'national culture', I argue that Soweto poetry is a medial literature. This oeuvre creates a dialogue between common binary constructions of race, agency, culture and locale, and therefore becomes a factor in the creation of Black Consciousness and not simply its reflection.

When re-reading Thengani Ngwenya's chapter on Soweto poetry in the recently published edited collection, *The Cambridge History of Southern African Literature*, I was struck by the claim that 'it cannot be gainsaid that Black Consciousness as a philosophy and a political ideology inspired – in direct and indirect ways – the work of the [Soweto] poets'.¹ Why that made me think twice I am not sure: it is, after all, an accurate statement, but, after a second reading, perhaps too simply formulated.

The Black Consciousness message is unmistakable throughout Soweto poetry. The following analysis will show how the poets I discuss continually reasserted black pride and identity; exhibited a new-found confidence; established an agency and indistinguishable energy that had previously been denied the black population because of the tight constraints of apartheid rule; and, similarly, attempted to rewrite history and 'challenge what they saw as the deliberate distortion or outright erasure of particular events from the collective memory of South Africa'.² However, as a complex body of thought that collected and reshaped (while possibly even corrupting) a highly divergent amount of cultural and political thought, Black Consciousness and the forms of literary expression that emerged in the same period frustrate any attempt to draw a straight line between them. For example, by simply considering where the Soweto poets published their work, one can see that their oeuvre cannot merely be understood as a reflection of Black Consciousness. They published in *The Classic*, a journal originally conceived before Black Consciousness emerged; *Staffrider*, the literary focal point of the Black Consciousness generation; and the *Medu Art Ensemble Newsletter*, published in Botswana after the Soweto uprising in 1976 and often seen as the creative wing of the ANC in exile, and a possible cover for their military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe.³ Thus I suggest that the Soweto poets not only manifested but continually probed and developed a new and complex form of literary expression. Their poetry does not reflect the Black Consciousness message per se, but

¹ T. Ngwenya, 'Black Consciousness Poetry: Writing Against Apartheid', in D. Attwell and D. Attidge (eds), *The Cambridge History of Southern African Literature* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 502.

² *Ibid.*, p. 504.

³ S-A. Gonzalez, 'Medu: Art and Resistance in Exile', in C. Kellner and S-A. Gonzalez (eds), *Thami Mnyele and Medu Arts Ensemble Retrospective* (Johannesburg, Jacana Media, 2009), pp. 79–86.

rather steps towards and helps to establish the ideology: it was not created by Black Consciousness but helped to create it.

In each section of this article I will move beyond some of the simplifications that too easily pervade critical commentary, beginning with Mongane Serote's work, then moving on to that of Siphso Sepamla, James Matthews and Njabulo Ndebele. Close literary analysis will reveal three main characteristics of Soweto poetry. First, it entered into dialogue with Black Consciousness and challenged some of its assumptions. Second, it contributed to Steve Biko's idea of a national culture, in which both African and white cultures would be equally embraced.⁴ Third, Soweto poetry was key to creating a Black Consciousness that had purchase outside the university campuses, which initially contained – and limited – its spread. Following this, the argument will turn to consider the performative aspect of Soweto poetry, to show how it was able to reach a black audience, shaping the ideology and influencing other writers who subsequently created new ideas around Black Consciousness. And, underlying each point, I will argue that Soweto poetry emerged in a form that urgently combined poetic traditions and denounced the dominant literary forms that the Soweto poets perceived as being complicit with apartheid oppression. This is a poetry that should not be considered 'anti-poetry' but rather hailed for its 'volume, power and originality'.⁵

Mongane Serote: Tempering Traditions

Mongane Serote is arguably the poet laureate of the Black Consciousness generation.⁶ Born in Sophiatown in May 1944, his poetry was loyal to his upbringing in Johannesburg. Through an intensely urban *oeuvre* that explored tensions between African history and the English language forced upon him, Serote used his poetry to pronounce himself the 'son of the people', firmly wedded to the political convictions of Black Consciousness.⁷ At the same time, however, his verse was integral to shaping the ideology of Black Consciousness and its associated literary expression. As they did with many of his contemporaries' work, critics wrote off much of Serote's poetry, especially his earlier verse, as lacking quality and being consumed by 'sheer protest'.⁸ Indeed, his verse did resound with elements of protest. For example, Ngwenya notes that Serote's poem 'Burning Cigarette' directly recalls 'The Negro Youth', which was written by Peter Abraham more than 30 years earlier, but was similarly done 'in typical protest mode and first published on 5 December 1936'.⁹ Serote's voice, however, matured beyond mere protest. To use the words he himself applied to a host of post-Sharpeville poets, Serote 'refused to accept living in a vacuum' and actively advocated change and a renewed black assertiveness.¹⁰ Such a change is particularly interesting when considered in the light of his education and influences.

⁴ S. Biko, 'Some African Cultural Concepts', in A. Stubbs (ed.), *I Write What I Like* (Oxford, Heinemann, 1987), p. 45.

⁵ M. Chapman, 'Introduction', in M. Chapman (ed.), *Soweto Poetry* (Scottsville, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 1988), p. 23.

⁶ M. Mzamane, *Black Consciousness Poets in South Africa 1967–1980* (PhD Thesis, University of Sheffield, 1984), p. 152.

⁷ E. Patel, 'Mongane Wally Serote', *Third World Quarterly*, 12, 1 (1990), pp. 187–93.

⁸ T. Couzens and E. Patel, 'Introduction', in T. Couzens and E. Patel (eds), *The Return of the Amasi Bird: Black South African Poetry, 1891–1981* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1982), p. 10.

⁹ Ngwenya, 'Black Consciousness Poetry', p. 510.

¹⁰ M. Serote, 'Post-Sharpeville Poetry: A Poet's View', *Third World Quarterly*, 10, 4 (1988), p. 1601.

Serote attended Morris Isaacson High School and, officially at least, was a product of Bantu Education and its tightly controlled syllabus, which excluded most classic English literature.¹¹ However, far from being confined to and influenced by the newly prescribed Bantu Education material, Morris Isaacson was one of few schools that established its own active presence and insisted on doing its own thing, which earned it recognition as a ‘cradle of resistance’. Serote was exposed to both the European Romantic poetry banned from the official syllabus – itself a form of anti-poetry – and African verse.¹² These two influences consistently shaped his poetry.

The clearest evidence of these competing influences can be found in Serote’s use of the lyric form, which is directly reminiscent of Romantic poetry but also of the *Drum* poets, who published in South Africa during the 1950s. This form is exemplified in Serote’s first collection, *Yakhal’inkomo*, where he ‘focused his vision through what one could almost call a “Wordsworthian” lens’.¹³ Furthermore, Serote’s earlier lyrics adopted the form of overheard utterance. These lyrics described the township community from within, capturing and contemplating what is said and done, while at times attempting to recover what is lost. The notion of overheard utterance, David Attwell notes, is supported by the collection’s title, which is not the sound of ‘cattle being slaughtered but of cattle watching [the other cattle’s misery,] vocalising empathy and suffering’.¹⁴ This idea returns us to the notion of protest, which continued in Serote’s poetry. Furthermore, watching is suggested by the image of the eye, which Serote uses repeatedly in his poems alongside representations of the ofay watcher, ‘a black person who has set himself or herself up as the watchdog of the community’.¹⁵

Overheard utterance references the rural past because of its relation to the role of *izimbongi* or praise singers, who overhear rumblings of discontent in their communities, transforming them into lyrics that speak truth to those in power. A form continually adapting to changing contexts, praise poetry is key to understanding Serote’s lyrical verse while it also shows how Soweto poetry cannot be read as simply being against poetry, for Serote’s work is rooted within established poetic traditions. A first point of analytic departure takes the *izimbongi* as working within their communities, rather than set apart from them. They owe their positions to public acclaim, they chronicle what is said or felt among the general population and do not ‘flatter epithets [but] deal primarily with the happenings in and around the tribe’.¹⁶ They act as spokespersons, watchers and watchdogs of the people. Interestingly, two lyrics that feature the ofay watcher showcase this relationship between the individual and the community. In these instances, Serote deals with the relationship metaphorically through depictions of rivers and seas. ‘Ofaywatcher–Blackwoman–Eternity’ [AQ1] shows the merger of the individual into the collective with the line

¹¹ C. Glaser, ‘Soweto’s Islands of Learning: Morris Isaacson and Orlando High Schools Under Bantu Education, 1958–1975’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 41, 1 (2015), pp. 159–71.

¹² Romantic poetry was itself a form of anti-poetry because it countered dominant Enlightenment thinking.

¹³ D. Livingstone, ‘The Poetry of Mtshali, Serote, Sepamla and Others in English: Notes Towards a Critical Evaluation’, in M. Chapman (ed.), *Soweto Poetry*, p. 158.

¹⁴ D. Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History* (Scottsville, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005), p. 146.

¹⁵ M. Mzamane, ‘Traditional Oral Forms’, in L. White and T. Couzens (eds), *Literature and Society in South Africa* (Harlow, Longman Group, 1984), p. 155.

¹⁶ A.C. Jordan, *Towards an African Literature: The Emergence of Literary Form in Xhosa* (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1973), p. 59.

‘tears flow like a river’.¹⁷ The metaphor is continued throughout the collection. In ‘During Thoughts After Ofay Watching’, [AQ2] the river comes to symbolise the inexhaustible spirit of the African people carrying their histories, which, despite violent episodes and endless ebbs and flows, will survive and one day be known.¹⁸

We are caught up in a turning tide
Slow; takings [AQ3] it pace, slow;
[...]
Many will not become waves, they will peep and perish,
There at the turning tide
The many waves gasping, the bubbles bursting rapidly,
Like closing eyes,
One day we’ll wake up,
And on the rocky cheeks of the bank they’ll be huge droplets flowing (ll. 12–23).

The collapse of the individual into the community is shown not only through choices of imagery and the skilful deployment of references to *izibongo* and praise poems. The use of the ‘collective I’ in most of Serote’s verses also announces the poet’s role in the current political climate. It works, from within, to break down the western literary tendency towards the individual while simultaneously deconstructing the literary form’s elitist nature. The poet thus enacts his ‘mission [...] duty [...] ultimate responsibility’ to articulate the collective black experience.¹⁹ He is not considered to be above the people he represents because of his unique skills of articulation, rather these skills are only a special function through which he must contribute to the community.²⁰ This idea of community acting through the poet reflects the emphasis that Black Consciousness placed on unity. Yet it also works beyond that, because the very public face of the poetry and its emphasis on the working urban environment illustrates an attempt to create a Black Consciousness community that reaches beyond the intellectual circles of its initial years to become a political movement that can attract support from a range of demographics, a transformation that coincided with *Yakhal’inkomo*’s publication.

Serote’s poetry makes more reference to *izibongo* than the instances sketched above. Mzamane cites deference and celebration as two of the most notable aspects of *izibongo*.²¹ Unsurprisingly, given the desire expressed by Black Consciousness thinkers to articulate the positive aspects of African history, deference and celebration are common features of Serote’s work. ‘Hell, Well, Heaven’ is a definite celebration of his people’s future success, as shown repeatedly by the declarative ‘I know I’m coming’. Moreover, it exhibits his pride in those who ‘still walk and work and still smile’ (l. 30). ‘City Johannesburg’ also begins with the deferential ‘this way I salute you’ (l. 1). A love poem to the urban metropolis, ‘City Johannesburg’ admits an often

¹⁷ M. Serote, *Yakhal’inkomo* (Johannesburg, Renoster Books, 1974).

¹⁸ Soweto poets portrayed different ethnic histories as one united South African history. Though admitting to the different ethnic groupings in South African literature, writers tried to lift themselves above the government’s Bantustan policy through this approach. See *A Journal of Opinion*, 6, 1 (1976).

¹⁹ K. Kgosisile, ‘Culture and Resistance in South Africa’, unpublished paper presented at the Culture and Resistance symposium, Gaborone, 1982, n.p.

²⁰ R. Rive, ‘The Role of the Black Writer in South African Society’, unpublished paper presented at the Culture and Resistance symposium, Gaborone, 1982, n.p.

²¹ Mzamane, ‘Traditional Oral Forms’, p. 153.

turbulent relationship that sometimes forces Serote to move beyond the constructions of common praise. As Wilkinson summarises,

[The city] appears as a viscous, mobile, octopus like monster drawing the surrounding territory into its omnipotent and all-devouring net and recalling the mythological swallowing monsters of South African orature. But, despite this link with the heroic poetry of his people, the poet is aware that to 'salute' Johannesburg the traditional praise-poem formulae are inadequate.²²

She goes on to suggest that the images of 'black and white roboted roads' (l. 19) 'reproduce the motions of B.W. Vilakazi's earlier but equally deadly "Monster of Steel"'.²³ This is arguably typical of Serote, who maintains a style frequently similar to Vilakazi's 1930s poems, which sought to imbue traditional African styles with the qualities of modern aesthetics. Serote, to use Attwell's phrase, sought to 'modernise tradition'.²⁴ Serote's use of the lyrical form alongside other references to western literatures matches Vilakazi's 'tempering process', explained as the 'use of Western stanza forms and metrical systems [...] only as vehicles or receptacles for our poetic images'.²⁵ This ability to temper his heritage is aided by Serote's refusal to evoke a romanticised past. Never longing for what is gone nor refusing to acknowledge its flaws, Serote places his past into an evolving dialogue with the present. Thus he provides western forms and influences with the seal of his own African culture, reconciles competing cultures and modernity with tradition, and promotes Biko's national culture.

Because praise poems for the chief frequently enunciated loyalty to the whole tribe, Serote uses his modernised praise poetry to cast Johannesburg, in 'City Johannesburg' and other poems of the city, as the physical embodiment of the holistic African experience. Personification is characteristic of oral tradition – for example Zulu *izimbongi* and Xhosa *iimbongi* tended to 'view everything, even animals and inanimate objects, in anthropogenic terms' – and the city, for Serote, deserves the value attached to its frequent personification.²⁶ Perhaps 'Alexandra' is the best example, a poem that also exemplifies Serote's distaste for a romanticised past. He acknowledges a love for Alexandra's past, present and future, while depicting the township as a mother figure. Despite the hardships and limited opportunities she brings to the narrator's life – she is 'bloody cruel' (l. 27) and able to 'frighten me' (l. 25) – he cannot help but return her love unconditionally. Although not the best of maternal figures, Alexandra remains forever his mother, and Serote can identify 'as one of its sons'.²⁷ Consequently, he aims for solidarity and to create a community through depictions of experiences shared by so many.

The female personification of Alexandra highlights the debates that have surrounded Black Consciousness's gendered discourse, which have recently come in for re-examination. Black Consciousness was initially portrayed as a male-dominated construction, where "'Manhood" was perhaps the most basic element'.²⁸ The lack of masculine power caused by apartheid was frequently represented in Black Consciousness literature by images of castration, while male activists often sought to

²² Wilkinson, 'Serote's Cities', p. 91. [AQ4]

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

²⁴ Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity*, p. 87.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

²⁶ Mzamane, 'Traditional Oral Forms', p. 153.

²⁷ U. Barnett, *A Vision of Order: A Study of Black South African Literature in English, 1914–1980* (London, University of Massachusetts Press, 1983), p. 56.

²⁸ Magaziner, *The Law and The Prophets*, p. 32. [AQ5]

reaffirm their power through their relations with black women. Soweto poetry explores this debate and, as a result, appears frequently in current commentaries. Vicki Briault Manus has criticised much Black Consciousness literature for the attitudes it adopts towards women.²⁹ Soweto poetry, however, portrays women more actively. They ‘are shown to be key participants in the resilient and complex township structure’ and in the personification of local areas of resistance, in Serote’s poem ‘Beerhall Queen’, for example.³⁰ But more readily found in Serote’s work is the importance of the female figure as the mother of the liberated nation, when juxtaposed against the masculine language that depicts the apartheid state. Not only does the female figure represent the modern African cultures of the urban environment, as in ‘Alexandra’, but it also stands for a historical past that must be remembered and continually reworked. In ‘Street-Lights and Houses’, Serote hankers for grandmamma to ‘tell me stories’ (l. 5), and begs her to explain the current situation. This links to the female folk-tales so prominent in the Northern Sotho languages that traditionally served an educative purpose and ‘afforded women the opportunity to protest’.³¹ Serote similarly protests implicitly in this instance. Grandmamma’s knowledge hints at ideas of generational wisdom and the very necessary place that history must hold in the present.

Serote’s poetry speaks across the gender and generational divides that came into sharp focus during the rise of Black Consciousness. Thus he created space for dialogue within the philosophy. Similarly, his collections speak across the racial and aesthetic divides that also first appeared during the 1970s. *Yakhal’inkomo* sought to create a dialogue among the races. Echoing the general response to Black Consciousness, Serote’s confrontational tone may have seemed to prevent constructive dialogue. In ‘What’s in this Black Shit?’ a militant youth confronts the white man:

So I said, hard and with all my might, ‘Shit!’
 I felt a little better
 But what’s good, is, I said it to his face, [AQ6]
 A thing my father wouldn’t dare to do (ll. 29–32).

The only dialogue appears to be the one-sided anger of the newly militant youth. However, the act of communication is secondary to the psychological development preceding it. The poem’s message is actually one of the black youth’s newfound confidence. *Yakhal’inkomo*’s true dialogue lies in Serote’s poem ‘Actual Dialogue’, including lines such as ‘Do not fear – – – / We will always meet’ (ll. 5–6), and Chapman has described how the poem ‘aptly reminds us, one of the key concerns of the Black Consciousness movement was to initiate a “dialogue” between the two modes of being (blackness and whiteness), which could help in eliminating distrust, fear and insecurity’.³² Chapman continues to remind us that much Soweto poetry remained confined to a predominantly white readership.³³ Indeed, it must be remembered that white publishers published most of the earliest Soweto poets’ collections. *Yakhal’inkomo* is of course one such example, and the layout of the front

²⁹ V. B. Manus, *Emerging Traditions* (Lanham, Lexington Books, 2011), p. 178.

³⁰ Ngwenya, ‘Black Consciousness Poetry’, p. 517.

³¹ Groenewald, ‘IsiNdebele, siSwati, Northern Sotho, Tshivenda and Xitsonga Oral Culture’, p. 96. [AQ7]

³² Ngwenya, ‘Black Consciousness Poetry’, p. 513.

³³ Chapman (ed.), *Soweto Poetry*.

cover, with the word ‘poetry’ appearing in a much larger font than the title, was perhaps intended to avoid subconsciously alienating white readers who would not be familiar with the historical African allusion referenced by the title. Therefore, I argue, *Yakhal’inkomo* invited dialogue with Black Consciousness because it did not adhere to the strict racial binaries that many critics suggested the ideology continued to support.

The very notion of poetry needed to be reconsidered in the wake of Soweto poetry. Returning briefly to the deployment of the profanity found in ‘What’s in this Black Shit?’, Chapman notes, ‘with powerful anti-poetic resonance the word “shit” became a weapon with which to undermine middle-class conceptions of poetic register’.³⁴ However, when meant to demarcate this new verse from accepted western literary conventions, the term ‘anti-poetic’ is problematic. Literally it suggests that the new verse is against poetry and directed more towards politics. Even Serote himself retrospectively has appeared to agree, writing, ‘the anger, bitterness and at times, cynicism and frustration [and] expletives [of Black Consciousness poetry] had a degenerative influence on cultural expression’.³⁵ However, the very presence of ‘poetic’ in the label confirms this form as poetry, though a form that reacted against what was commonly deemed to be quality. For Horst Zander, Black Consciousness’s anti-poetics marked a return to a traditional model by reducing the gap between discourses and by displaying enhanced social and political capital because, as I demonstrate, the poetry had direct political implications.³⁶ Serote displays the ‘anti-poetic’, but not to the detriment of the aesthetic. His verse is marked by a ‘double commitment’ to his Black Consciousness-influenced socio-political outlook and to literature.³⁷ These were not the same thread but two strands plaited together.

A leading example of such interweaving is Serote’s use of imagery, which displays not just his aesthetic qualities but also his social commitment. Initial reviews criticised his verse for all too frequently representing *dongas*, [AQ8] sweat, tears and blood.³⁸ Such images should be expected, given the social project he had undertaken, because Serote sought to verbalise the anger and the suffering of the African population. However, his range increased and his voice matured, much as Soweto poetry as a canon matured into its own form of literary merit. Reminiscent of John Keats, who likewise studiously learned his craft and whose heavy influence is present elsewhere in Serote’s poetry, Serote quickly embraced sensual images and began to juxtapose natural images of flora and fauna with the township and scenes of modernity. Thus he reflects on the pronounced divide between the urban and rural, and the impossibility of completely reconnecting with the past. Serote’s poetic images mirror the songs of migrant workers, who transposed ‘a new world of experience which bridges the gap between past and present, town and country’.³⁹

Furthermore, Serote shows a pronounced reliance on ‘metaphors drawn from the flesh and the senses’.⁴⁰ Such sensual images are best exemplified in ‘On Growing’. Consider:

³⁴ M. Chapman, ‘The Possibilities of Imaginative Freedom: Expression in a State of Emergency’, *English Academy Review*, 5, 1 (1988), p. 24.

³⁵ Serote, ‘Post-Sharpeville Poetry’, p. 1604.

³⁶ H. Zander, ‘Prose–Poem–Drama: “Proemdra” – “Black Aesthetics” versus “White Aesthetics” in South Africa’, *Research in African Literatures*, 30, 1 (1999), pp. 12–22.

³⁷ Patel, ‘Mongane Wally Serote’, p. 192.

³⁸ L. Abrahams, ‘Political Vision of a Poet: Mongane Serote’s *Tsetlo*’, in Chapman (ed.), *Soweto Poetry*, p. 74; Livingstone, ‘The Poetry of Mtshali, Serote, Sepamla and Others in English’.

³⁹ Groenewald, ‘IsiNdebele, siSwati, Northern Sotho, Tshivenda and Xitsonga Oral Culture’, pp. 95–6.

⁴⁰ A. Levumo, ‘Mongane Serote’s *No Baby Must Weep*’, in Chapman (ed.), *Soweto Poetry*, p. 70.

This is not dying when the trees
Leave their twigs
To grow blindly long into windows like fingers into eyes
[...]
Twigs thrusting into windows and leaves falling on the sills,
Are like thoughts uncontrolled and stuffing the heart (ll. 1–9).

The poem speaks to the three-stage psychological battle identified by Black Consciousness – first consciousness, second words, finally action – and works through heightened synaesthesia, the blurring of the senses. The gap between the senses is narrowed. Although synaesthesia speaks to modernity, the multi-sensual dimension means the written word has to be considered simultaneously at several levels, much as in the traditional oral poem's performance.⁴¹

Serote's use of rhythm and rhyme also speaks to modernity's possible clash with the African oral form. The oral rhythm is most prominent. Serote employs familiar African rhythms that alternates stressed and unstressed syllables in fixed patterns. Additionally, rhythm is created by the use of repetition and parallelism, as in *izibongo*.⁴² 'Hell, Well, Heaven' includes the chant-like refrain

But brother
I know I'm coming
I do not know where I've been.

Parallel phrasing is evinced in 'Street-Lights and Houses', for example in the phrasing: 'why, when I walk, there are noises / why, when I come, the shadows move' (ll. 17–18). Triplets can also be noted, and 'City Johannesburg' provides a good example: 'in my flesh, in my mind, in my blood' (l. 32). This again reinforces Black Consciousness's all encompassing nature, embracing the mental and the physical.

Serote's use of references to oral forms simultaneously created an urgent rhythm that represented the pace, patterns and sounds of contemporary township life. Indeed, this all-consuming speed is an undoubted factor behind much of the period's 'anti-poetics'. Rules were broken because poets did not have time to master them, and for good reasons: for example, the people's urgency demanded a reworking of language. Thus a simple, easily understood language was required, which demanded that the poet use English although it created ideological problems. Serote chose English despite admitting to Mzamane, 'I had problems writing in English. Who are you writing for when you write in English?'⁴³ 'Black Bells' dramatises his concern about his chosen medium:

WORDS

Trying to get out
Words. Words. By Whitey.
No. No. No. By Whitey.
I know I'm trapped.

⁴¹ K. Barber, 'Text and Performance in Africa', *Research in African Literature*, 20, 2 (2005), pp. 264–77; R. Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Upload Edition, Open Book Publishers, 2012).

⁴² M. Buthelezi, 'Praise, Politics, Performance: From Zulu Izibongo to the Zionists', in Attwell and Attridge (eds), *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, p. 84.

⁴³ Mzamane, *Black Consciousness Poets*, p. 352.

Helpless
Hopeless
You've trapped me whitey!... (ll. 19–26). [AQ9]

Serote recognised that he was trapped by a system that denied him a voice and by a language that was not his own. This epitomises Jeremy Cronin's claims that Soweto poets 'began almost paradoxically by voicing noiselessness, they struggle with words, they're stumbling, explosive, grinding, stuttering'.⁴⁴ Ultimately these poets found new directions. For some this involved a turn against poetry, which has been supposed to result in a reduction in quality. As I have shown, Serote attracted such criticism for his attempts to escape the limitations of western language and forms. Yet he was also attacked for focusing too much on western influences. Christopher Hope's review of *Yakhal'inkomo* dismissed the collection as 'seldom poetry'. Serote, Hope wrote, relied too much on overseas literature and influences that did not 'carry quite the same punch out here [in South Africa]'.⁴⁵

I disagree with Hope, and argue that Serote trod a middle path and became 'assimilationist'.⁴⁶ His collections bring together the urban with the rural, black with white, African cultures and literatures with western. Moreover, although Serote foregrounded Black Consciousness's core values, he did not shy away from offering critique and gesturing towards a wider audience. Trapped in the horrors of the apartheid system, Serote achieved an 'almost inarticulate beauty'.⁴⁷

Sipho Sepamla: Dialogue Not Reflection

Twelve years Serote's senior, Sepamla's relationship with Black Consciousness is somewhat problematic. His first collections were published before the rise of Black Consciousness, and he refused to be drawn into political movements. Sepamla consistently stressed his individuality: for example, describing himself as an African, not the collective black, at a writers' seminar in Johannesburg in May 1975.⁴⁸ He rejected both white and black nationalist ideologies and, instead, advocated the constant recognition of the other racial category. However, it is still fruitful to place his work in the context of Soweto poetry. He launched and edited the *New Classic*, which became a Black Consciousness literary mouthpiece, while he published his leading collection, *The Soweto I Love*, after the 1976 uprising.⁴⁹ This collection, originally banned, found an easy home alongside the period's prevailing cultural output, and continued to reflect and probe Black Consciousness thought.

The urgency that fuelled the anger of Soweto poetry is encapsulated in Sepamla's work. The title of his collection *Hurry Up To It!*⁵⁰ leaves no doubt that Sepamla feels 'it is time things really changed'.⁵¹ Time remains a constant theme. 'Go Slow', 'A Pause' and 'Talk, Talk, Talk' all attack the hesitant approach to the struggle that had lasted too long.⁵² Published in 1975, these poems, arguably, critique the

⁴⁴ R. Barnard, 'Speaking Places: Prison, Poetry and the South African Nation', *Research in African Literature*, 32, 3 (2001), p. 166.

⁴⁵ C. Hope, 'The Poet in the Abattoir: Mongane Serote's *Yakhal'inkomo*', in Chapman (ed.), *Soweto Poetry*, pp. 72–3.

⁴⁶ Mzamane, *Black Consciousness Poets*, p. 68.

⁴⁷ Ngwenya, 'Black Consciousness Poetry', p. 519.

⁴⁸ Mzamane, *Black Consciousness Poets*, p. 200.

⁴⁹ S. Sepamla, *The Soweto I Love* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1977).

⁵⁰ S. Sepamla, *Hurry Up To It!* (Johannesburg, Ad Donker, 1975).

⁵¹ J. Alvarez-Pereyre, *The Poetry of Commitment in South Africa* (London, Heinemann, 1979), p. 216.

⁵² *Ibid.*

Black Consciousness movement, which had been the dominant struggle ideology for several years, because of its endless philosophising.⁵³ Such criticisms, however, ignore the increased urgency of Black Consciousness after the Soweto uprisings, and other enduing similarities between the ideology and Sepamla's poetry. Notably, Sepamla illustrates the new-found confidence within the African population. 'Darkness' shows Africans walking tall, addressing white men as equals and challenging them not to fear the darkness:

yes sir i have arrived
walk the night if you dare
[...]
i walk erect in the night
you crouch in retreat (ll. 1–6).

Furthermore, the African's inferiority complex is challenged by the use of direct address in 'The Applicant'. The ironic parallelisms beginning each stanza – 'Ja Meneer I qualify', 'Ja Meneer I admit', 'Ja Meneer I agree', 'Ja Meneer I submit', 'Ja Meneer I confess' – use the vocative to illustrate the Africans' confidence to address the hegemony. Although the verb choice seemingly suggests an increasing power difference between oppressors and oppressed, the undoubted irony disputes such deteriorating relations. Africans are instead gaining strength. They conduct the riposte on their terms.

Humour is the hallmark of Sepamla's poetry. Mzamane confirms him as 'one of the most celebrated satirists',⁵⁴ and, reminiscent of Mafika Gwala's attacks on the African middle classes, Sepamla concentrates his anger through wit, irony and innuendo. 'To Whom it May Concern', the opening poem of his first collection begins:

Bearer
Bare of everything but particulars
Is a Bantu (ll. 1–3).⁵⁵

Here, the word-play demonstrates the hardships Africans have in carrying forward the rights and histories that apartheid continually attempted to deny them. Indeed, Sepamla made the mistreatment of history an important concern of his poetry. Ngwenya exemplifies this point with reference to Sepamla's 'History-books, Amen!', noting that 'the final stanza [...] explains the responsibilities of the Black Poet, who is not only a creator of aesthetic beauty but also an astute student of history'.⁵⁶ Sepamla exhibited an 'underlying understanding of the problems' facing the African population and this included history's misuse,⁵⁷ while irony reinforces his knowledge of the situation. Interestingly, this technique also provides a hint of the nature of Biko's national culture, because irony and humour are common characteristics of

⁵³ B. Hirson, *Year of Fire, Year of Ash* (London, Zed Press, 1979).

⁵⁴ Mzamane, *Black Consciousness Poets*, p. 207.

⁵⁵ S. Sepamla, 'To Whom It May Concern', in R. Royston (ed.), *Black Poets in South Africa* (London, Heinemann, 1973).

⁵⁶ Ngwenya, 'Black Consciousness Poetry', p. 505.

⁵⁷ M. Gwala, 'Staffrider Workshop: Poems and Criticism', *Staffrider*, 2, 3 (1979), p. 57.

Zulu *izibongo* and also reflect the witticisms that Sepamla encountered when studying Shakespeare at school.⁵⁸

Word-play is not possible without a firm appreciation of language. And Sepamla's language is notable for two other reasons. First, his work is characterised by hybrid language and the *tsotsitaal* dialect of the streets. Writing of 'everyday on the street',⁵⁹ Sepamla embraces *tsotsitaal* and speaks directly to the township populace. More than 'a fugitive attempt to evade censorship',⁶⁰ Sepamla's choice of medium is a reaction to the imposition of Afrikaans, the necessity of using English, and the concerns of working Africans whose comprehension of the official languages was limited. He once spoke of his concern when hearing '*khulumani isiZulu* – speak Zulu!' shouted at a township theatre performance.⁶¹ Sepamla, I argue, launches a three-pronged attack: he criticises the African bourgeois 'obscurity of high seriousness' that stressed standard and grandiose English;⁶² he implicitly attacks Black Consciousness for neglecting the working classes (Sepamla prefers to frame a message with wider popular purchase); he writes against apartheid's stress on linguistic purity and clearly defined language categories. Indeed, the apartheid nationalists' (mis)use of language and the role it played in the implementation of apartheid is directly attacked in 'Words, Words, Words', published in *The Soweto I Love*. In typical tongue-in-cheek fashion, Sepamla concludes:

we mean words
that spell out our lives
words, words, words
for there's a kind of poetic licence
doing the rounds in these parts (ll. 27–31).

The Blues Is You In Me is the collection that showcases *tsotsitaal* the most. And the poem that gave this collection its name is also remarkable for the parallels it draws with blues music. Addressing themes typical of blues, Sepamla incorporates 'vocabulary borrowed from America (cop, jitterbug, jive)'.⁶³ However, despite exploring South Africa's cultural and linguistic relationships with the west, he never leaves his locale. Alvarez-Pereyre reaffirms that the conclusion of Sepamla's 'The Blues Is You In Me' is the conclusion of Black Consciousness: 'the Blackman offloading the yoke'.⁶⁴ This poem creates the narrative of Black Consciousness, just as the lexical choices here and across the whole collection reflect Black Consciousness's cultural goal and the incorporation of western culture alongside modern African culture.

⁵⁸ Sepamla observes, 'I was brought up on Shakespeare, Dickens, Lawrence, Keats and other English greats [...] I received a rich sustenance from these men. But for my body to be healthy, for my eyes to have kept me on the right course I would have liked to have been fed on Mphahlele, La Guma, Themba, Nkosi [and] the "unrewarding rage" of [...] Afro-American writers', in Chapman (ed.), *Soweto Poetry*, p. 116.

⁵⁹ M. Mutloatse, 'Sepamla Tightens the Loose Screws: Review of Sipho Sepamla's *The Blues Is You In Me*', in Chapman (ed.), *Soweto Poetry*, p. 81.

⁶⁰ Chapman, *Soweto Poetry*, p. 19.

⁶¹ K. Sole, 'Oral Performance and Social Struggle in Contemporary South African Literature', in D. Bunn and J. Taylor (eds), *From South Africa* (New York, Northwestern University Press, 1987) p. 258.

⁶² N. Ndebele, *Fool and Other Stories* (Harlow, Longman, 1985), p. 217.

⁶³ Alvarez-Pereyre, *The Poetry of Commitment*, p. 224.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

your hope
 take away
 your language
 give
 me
 this
 day
 myself ... (ll. 6–18).

The fragmentation, along with the startlingly simple language, reinforces the horror and violence of past events, but simultaneously provides a cold assurance. This control creates an assertive, declarative tone that chronicles the reasons for the uprising and demonstrates the renewed sense of purpose that those who were inspired by Black Consciousness have gained. Furthermore, the poem's visual imagery deserves mention. Consider, for example, 'gunners sweating smoke swaying drunkenly' (l. 57) or the description of cruelty 'that makes me cry without tears' (l. 80). Such lines are remarkable not just for their purpose but for their aesthetic beauty. Line 57 conjures the smoke's movement and impermanence through sibilance. Line 80 has a poignant precision with the language that so often marks quality.

It stands to reason that reproducing a fragmented reality would see language itself become fragmented, and disintegrate.⁷¹ Sepamla himself once observed, 'if a situation requires broken or "murdered" English, then for God's sake one must do that'.⁷² His form thus observes the prevailing situation in South Africa while simultaneously exploring the language debate that existed within Black Consciousness, which failed ever to reach a satisfying conclusion. However, his poetry depicts more than darkness. Coupled with aesthetic skill, Sepamla's lightness of touch, vitality and humour encapsulates the everyday urban environment in its fullest, and celebrates the township population's anger, as well as its culture and potential.

James Matthews: Breaking Binaries

The fiercest articulation of anger in Soweto poetry came in the co-authored collection of poetry, *Cry Rage!*, published in 1972 by James Matthews and Gladys Thomas.⁷³ Born in the Cape Flats in 1929 to a working-class family, Matthews first wrote reports and short stories for *Drum*. The pressures of writing in an environment that was far from conducive, however, saw him become disillusioned with prose, forcing him into silence until he turned to poetry in the early 1970s. Poetry, he felt, was a form more suitable for rapid and accessible declarations.⁷⁴ Fuelled by the emotionally charged climate of Black Consciousness in South Africa, Matthews released a body of work, *Cry Rage!*, which was 'plumb with passion',⁷⁵ and which became the first book of poetry to be banned in South Africa. Indeed, Matthews himself struggled to 'decide

⁷¹ L. Nkosi, 'Black Writing in South Africa', *Rixaka*, 1, 1 (1985), pp. 31–2.

⁷² S. Sepamla, 'The Black Writer in South Africa Today: Problems and Dilemmas', in Chapman (ed.), *Soweto Poetry*, p. 117.

⁷³ J. Matthews and G. Thomas, *Cry Rage!* (Johannesburg, Sprocas Publications, 1972).

⁷⁴ Es'kia Mphahlele argued that poetry worked in flashes, as the novel similarly did: 'just a flash here and there will illuminate the truth'. See E. Mphahlele, *Journal of Opinion*, 6, 1 (1976), p. 15. [AQ10]

⁷⁵ N. Gordimer, 'English Language Literature and Politics in South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 2, 2 (1976), p. 147.

whether [Soweto poetry] had aesthetic value or [was] a work of anarchy'.⁷⁶ Gordimer hints towards the latter by suggesting that Matthews' passion 'was not always matched with skill',⁷⁷ while elsewhere she claims that his work was simply 'a public address system for the declarations of a muzzled prose writer'.⁷⁸ In many ways, though, Matthews did not aspire to anything else. He distanced himself vehemently from the label of a poet. He felt that such a title would be 'self-deluding', and his poems were merely 'utterings'.⁷⁹

These utterings are notable for the numerous ways in which they interact with Black Consciousness and offer a more nuanced reading of the ideology. *Cry Rage!* is embedded in the urban experience and dramatises the toil of daily township life, the effects of resettlement policies, migrant labour and the systems of racial classification and legislation against mixed-race relationships that Matthews felt undermined fundamental human values. Central to the collection is Matthews' need to expose these horrors and create a broad Black Consciousness message that could reach an international black audience and incorporate a global black experience. Matthews sought 'to bring together Black people from Harlem, Notting Hill, Soweto and Manenberg'.⁸⁰ His work shows evidence of direct borrowing from the African-American liberation struggle. For example, Matthews references James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* in the last line of his 'utterings'. Jazz also features, though perhaps more bluntly than in the poetry of the others discussed here, who incorporated jazz's rhythmical influence more subtly. In Matthews' utterings, however, which broke down rhythms, structure and traditional poetic features, only limited room exists for such allusion. Instead Matthews repeatedly makes direct mention of musicians, including Nina Simone. And, as in Black Consciousness discourse, Matthews evokes Christianity in order to undermine its justification for apartheid oppression. This is clearly the case in 'Uttering 63', where the poem also conjures the images of castration that proliferated in Black Consciousness discourse. Matthews writes, the 'white pharaoh [will] turn us into eunuchs and not men' (l. 6–10). [AQ11]

The second notable feature of Matthews' poetry is its complex relationship with the white establishment. Black Consciousness presented itself as a movement that avoided, and continually criticised – in frequently hostile terms – liberal politics. However, Matthews' poems helped to define a philosophy that did allow cordial relationships and mutual understanding between Black Consciousness and white liberalism. This complex linkage is discussed by Alvarez-Pereyre, who observes that Matthews' writing is 'far from being the Manichean kind of work in which the whites are simplistically categorized as the oppressors and the blacks as victims'.⁸¹ Matthews, at times, appears to exhibit an unreasoning hostility towards the international liberal community and campaigners who neglect 'the rib-thin / children of Dimbaza'.⁸² He depicts the hypocrisy with which liberals concentrate their protests on the plight of suffering children elsewhere in the world. Moreover, he sees through

⁷⁶ J. Matthews, 'Is Black Poetry Valid?', unpublished paper presented at the Culture and Resistance symposium, Gaborone, 1982.

⁷⁷ Gordimer, 'English Language Literature', p. 147.

⁷⁸ N. Gordimer, 'Writers in South Africa: The New Black Poets', *Dalhousie Review*, 53, 4 (1973), p. 663.

⁷⁹ Matthews, *Cry Rage!*, p. 70.

⁸⁰ Mzamane, *Black Consciousness Poets*, p. 298.

⁸¹ Alvarez-Pereyre, *The Poetry of Commitment*, p. 207.

⁸² Matthews, *Cry Rage!*, p. 6.

the rhetoric that liberal groups used as a façade to cover their lack of meaningful action, dismissing it as ‘Liberal Student Crap’.

Alongside these vehement criticisms, though, Matthews found it sometimes suitable to praise the liberal movement. ‘Cry Rage!’ includes an uttering that, evoking the violent clashes that occurred at a Cape Town rally, reveres the liberal student body’s selfless dedication to the anti-apartheid cause. Matthews thus creates a more nuanced overall philosophy, which facilitates a distinction ‘between true and “false” white liberals’.⁸³

Message was crucial to Matthews. When expressing an uncontrollable rage, he preferred a linear poetry of facts, slogans, simple similes and metaphors, prioritised over deep symbolism and other poetic techniques. Furthermore, simple declarations, which he often repeated from poem to poem, tended to copy and invert the sloganeering of the Nationalist government. This technique does not lead to images being overdone but instead strengthens their argument by allowing links to be made and the same grievance to be re-deployed in relation to the contextual change provided by each poem’s differing situation. In contrast to Ursula Barnett’s view of *Pass Me a Meatball, Jones*, suggesting that Matthews did achieve aesthetic quality,⁸⁴ I feel that his poetry was primarily one full of ‘words of pain and rage’.⁸⁵ Perhaps Matthews, more than anyone, personifies the ‘anti-poetics’ of Soweto period poetry.

Njabulo Ndebele: Challenging the Generations

Opposite in character to Matthews’s poetry is that of Njabulo Ndebele. Born in 1948, the youngest of the poets discussed here, Ndebele was arguably the most literarily conscious. At the heart of his concerns lay his language choice, with English seeming the most obvious, given his education. Through the medium of English he had studied English Literature at Master’s level in Lesotho and for a brief period in Cambridge. Moreover, after failing to finish a novel in 1977, he felt it necessary to refine his writing style, and embarked on a creative writing course in Denver under Mphahlele. In America, he lost contact with the Zulu language, and his confidence to express himself adequately in it. He consistently maintained an allegiance to his mother-tongue, however, and worried that English-language literature was insufficient to transmit his own individual identity and the cultural vibrancy of his heritage. He wrote privately that he feared the very real possibility of ‘an anaemic English literary culture’.⁸⁶

Consequently, Ndebele studiously undertook a translation course while in America, and experimented with applying western literary advances, including stream of consciousness, to isiZulu and the African literary tradition that he described as ‘remarkably backward’.⁸⁷ He remained unsuccessful, and was left, in his own words,

[e]xperiencing an internal clash between what I politically recognized as being ultimately desirable on the one hand, and on the other, what was feasible [...] I had to come to terms

⁸³ Alvarez-Pereyre, *The Poetry of Commitment*, p. 214.

⁸⁴ Barnett, *A Vision of Order*.

⁸⁵ Matthews, *Cry Rage!*, p. 1.

⁸⁶ Mzamane, *Black Consciousness Poets*, p. 315.

⁸⁷ N. Ndebele, *South African Literature and Culture* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 86.

with the practicality of writing in English, as opposed to the political desirability of writing in Zulu.⁸⁸

The reasoning, which he expressed later in the same interview with Bernth Lindfors, is a particularly erudite comment on the period. The *Staffrider* generation of Soweto poets to which Ndebele contributed was consumed with the urgency of the struggle, and this urgency was a motivational factor behind Ndebele's continuing use of English. He replied to Lindfors,

I had arrived at conclusions similar to Ngugi [to write in the vernacular]. [However] I am still going through the period when it is crucial for me to write in a language that is readily available to me, NOW. I am eager to communicate NOW. I can't afford the time nor the energy to go through another period of apprenticeship.⁸⁹

His language choice reflected Ndebele's dedication to his craft and his desire to produce work of literary quality, along with his will to contribute to the struggle. Ndebele personifies Black Consciousness's choice to sacrifice language for the sake of other urgent concerns.

Indeed, Ndebele became a leading exponent of Black Consciousness, while David Attwell has suggested that Ndebele's writing 'would not have been possible without the Black Consciousness movement'.⁹⁰ Yet this interaction had a deeper level. Undoubtedly influenced by issues similar to those that motivated other poets of the same political persuasion, Njabulo remained hostile to Soweto poetry's apparent anti-poetics and political slogans. He feared that such pamphleteering would lead to 'conviction without knowledge'.⁹¹ Conversely, Barnett rightly describes his work as 'most beautiful' and reaching 'lyrical heights'.⁹² He maintained a commitment to the recovery of the self and celebrating blackness but also, through creating a new direction in Black Consciousness expression, he showed that this could be achieved through literary and intellectual refinement. Gordimer, for example, highlights the role that sexual imagery and love play in his poetry.⁹³

Ndebele's collection of essays published in *South African Literature and Culture* addresses his grievances with the apparent anti-poetics of Black Consciousness and the post-Soweto period.⁹⁴ Among these essays are 'Turkish Tales' and the 'Rediscovery of the Ordinary', which, briefly summarised, advocate the need to embrace the traditions of a community story-telling heritage and focus writing on the quotidian. For Ndebele, these two styles offered the best way to challenge oppression and, my argument suggests, had already been showcased in his own early poetry. Furthermore, these themes continue to show Ndebele's commitment to Black Consciousness's cultural outlook. A respect for communal story-telling in contemporary literature allows African cultures to be remade anew, adapting them to the prevailing socio-political environment. This comes through in Ndebele's poetry, which, through a constant use of metaphor, myth, superstition and moral proverb, opens up an obvious dialogue with Matthews's more linear 'utterings'.

⁸⁸ N. Ndebele, interview with Bernth Lindfors, in B. Lindfors (ed.), *Africa Talks Back* (Trenton, NJ, African World Press, 2002), pp. 233–4.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 236–7.

⁹⁰ Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity*, p. 180.

⁹¹ Ndebele, *South African Literature and Culture*, p. 138.

⁹² Barnett, *A Vision of Order*, p. 73.

⁹³ N. Gordimer, *The Black Interpreters* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1973), p. 60.

⁹⁴ Ndebele, *South African Literature and Culture*.

Proverb is best exemplified in ‘The Revolution of the Aged’.⁹⁵ Aside from riddles and maxims including ‘if you cannot master the wind / flow with it’ (ll. 10–11), the poem relays the fable of a flute. Commenting directly on the contemporary political situation, the flute is shaped as a gun, which is borrowed by a stranger and subsequently not returned. The stranger is cast as the oppressor, who can find no tune while playing. In his hands the flute only ‘hisses death’ (l. 50). Mzamane has taken this to yield two lessons:

The ultimate irony in the position of the oppressors lies in the fact that the more ruthless their actions become the less firmly entrenched their future prospects are likely to be. Their triumphs have turned sour on them and their victories hollow. By contrast, their victims are gathering strength all the time for the final onslaught against White privilege [and] victory for the forces of liberation [...] The youth must [also] learn that if they continue to act without proper indebtedness to their past, they risk putting off the final outcome of the struggle by repeating the mistakes of the past.⁹⁶

This interpretation affirms Black Consciousness’s project and follows the route mapped by Biko towards liberation. Initially, the status quo is not disturbed. Both the oppressor and oppressed continue their own internal projects until an ultimate point is reached. When the oppressed have won their psychological fight and gained strength, they are ready to launch the final push for liberation. Conversely, however, the second lesson questions the ignorant anger of contemporary youth and, in so doing, creates dialogue with Black Consciousness, which was founded on the student body and frequently criticised the contributions that older generations made to the anti-apartheid struggle. Ndebele warns against these criticisms and advocates respect for the actions and knowledge of his elders. Consequently he extends the message of Black Consciousness to a wider group, including the old.

This concern with generational conflict remains a frequent feature of Ndebele’s poetry and prose. ‘The Revolution of the Aged’ attacks the modern and the urban African youth who, fit only for the sewers,

Burned with scorn
Loaded with revolutionary maxims
Hot for quick results (ll. 20–22).

In contrast, he presents elders who bring proverbs and wisdom. Thus, although their actions may be slower, the old hold a more revolutionary type of power. Equated not only with ignorance, youth is equated also with innocence. Ndebele uses references to nature to describe the young boy’s activities in ‘Little Dudu’, while, in a second example, a child’s worries over the tiger depicted in ‘A Child’s Delirium’ are expressed through the statement-and-response format of traditional oral childhood rhymes.⁹⁷ This second example also criticises the apartheid state’s ability to destroy the family unit: in the poem, the father is absent and the mother is unable to provide adequate reassurance to calm the child’s unease.

A final example highlights how this generational conflict is constantly layered with tensions between the urban and the rural. The imagery in ‘I Hid My Love in a Sewage’ contains a distinct earthiness that comments on generational wisdom and the

⁹⁵ N. Ndebele, ‘The Revolution of the Aged’, in Couzens and Patel (eds), *The Return of the Amasi Bird*, pp. 386–8.

⁹⁶ Mzamane, *Black Consciousness Poets*, p. 317.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 314.

migrant experience. Lying among evocations of nature, ‘the plains and the greens’ (l. 4), the poet speaks of knowledge and understanding:

I knew the secrets of the world,
I knew the secret pleasures,
The better pleasures (ll. 28–30).

The comparative form in line 30 presupposes the difficulties of the urban experience. Pastoral imagery eventually gives way to urban structures, and the poet laments his lost identity and faith:

God, I knew I had lost:
O who am I? Who am I?
I am the hoof that once
Grazed in silence upon the grass
But now rings like a bell on tarred streets (ll. 49–53).

Attwell’s opinion of Ndebele’s fiction finds resonance in this extract: theories of the self are explored in order to comment on and ‘stage an epistemological recovery’.⁹⁸ Attwell suggests that this technique is an implicit critique of Bantu Education, a point that can be supported through the relationships constructed in Ndebele’s poetry between knowledge loss, migrancy and the (dis)associations between country and city. Bantu Education found its motivation in the large, growing urban population and the resulting social disharmony.⁹⁹

Moreover, by focusing on childhood and knowledge, Ndebele constructs an invisible link and a unity from the past to the present and the future. This relationship was previously not found in Black Consciousness, obsessed as it was with the present and hesitant to speak of the future.¹⁰⁰ Ndebele’s work, meanwhile, is ultimately addressed to the new generation, ‘for whom his vision of a unified community is of the greatest relevance’.¹⁰¹ Ndebele identifies the youth and the processes of psychological recovery they must undergo as the root of change. Yet, in so doing, he also charges them with the responsibility of restoring modern African culture as the equal of western cultures.

Poetry’s Public Face: Inspiring an Audience

The above literary analysis has shown how Soweto poetry consistently opened dialogue with Black Consciousness. Verse penned by Serote, Sepamla, Matthews and Ndebele probed common assumptions about the movement and created space for further thought on key issues, including the language debate, the place of liberalism and the validity of the generational divide. Their poetic form, meanwhile, engaged itself in defining what their political ideology meant as a literary form, and gestured towards Biko’s ideas of a national culture. Yet such discussion of content and stylistics can go only so far in explaining how Soweto poetry was able to reach a

⁹⁸ Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity*, p. 180.

⁹⁹ J. Hyslop, ‘A Destruction Coming In: Bantu Education as Response to Social Crisis’, in P. Bonner, P. Delius and D. Posel (eds), *Apartheid’s Genesis, 1935–1962* (Braamfontein, Ravan Press, 1993), pp. 393–410.

¹⁰⁰ Magaziner, *The Law and The Prophets*, p. 51.

¹⁰¹ M. Trump, ‘Part of the Struggle: Black Writing and the South African Liberation Movement’, in M. Trump (ed.), *Rendering Things Visible* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1990), p. 169.

wider black audience and influence the nature of Black Consciousness. To truly appreciate this, it is necessary to consider Soweto poetry's public face. While many scholars suggest that the poets discussed here concerned themselves solely with the page, such opinions discount how important performance was to them, just as it was to more notable orators, including Ingoapele Madingoane.¹⁰² This was, after all, a time where poetry 'moved from the page to the stage'¹⁰³ and 'was made at public meetings, at poetry readings, at mass meetings of all kinds'.¹⁰⁴

Mass performances of the kind seen in the late 1970s and early 1980s admittedly took place less often in the early years of Soweto poetry, when readings were mainly confined to small groups of supporters. Ari Sitas, though, has observed how these poets quickly began to move in 'larger and larger concentric circles outwards attempting to reach the Black working class'.¹⁰⁵ Sitas goes on to suggest that these attempts largely failed. But I contend that these performances greatly increased in popularity – culminating in the creation of performance groups such as Medupe – which directly inspired and influenced township youth. Such was the passion of the readings that they resonated with the audience, and the poems became popularly known, quoted and discussed in bars and shebeens. Indeed, in a remark certainly applicable to the Soweto poets, Brown notes that Madingoane's performances of 'Black Trial', 'proved so powerful that many township youths in the late 1970s could recite the whole of the sequence from memory'.¹⁰⁶ Performance would have allowed Soweto poetry to gain the kind of popular capital that helped to create a Black Consciousness message that directly resonated with and influenced the township youth. Moreover, performance was not confined to poetry readings but became commonplace at mass political rallies. Here, it was integrated with political speeches delivered by prominent Black Consciousness and Negritude figures from South Africa and abroad. Thus this juxtaposition of performance and speech physically demonstrated Soweto poetry's interaction with and influence on the politics of the day.

Performance not only allowed the poetics of Soweto poetry to circulate and interact with political discourse, but simultaneously offered the Soweto poets themselves similar personal opportunities. Small reading groups, such as those that provided the foundations of *Staffrider* magazine, saw the Soweto poets interact with younger writers and often take on *de facto* mentoring roles. Richard Rive, a writer and critic who worked in similar circles, though was not himself directly linked to Black Consciousness, has observed how 'fairly well established writers [within *Staffrider*] are deliberately trying to identify themselves with other writers who are not quite as fortunate or as widely published'.¹⁰⁷ In so doing, these leading figures of the initial Soweto generation influenced a younger crop of writers and thinkers, who went on to embrace new strands of an increasingly militant and confrontational Black Consciousness in the years immediately after the 1976 Soweto uprising. This perhaps found leadership most notably in Chris van Wyk and Fhazel Johannesburg. And, in

¹⁰² D. Brown, 'Black Consciousness, Tradition and Modernity: Ingoapele Madingoane's "Black Trial"', *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 9, 1 (2011), pp. 1–26.

¹⁰³ M. Mzamane, 'The Use of Traditional Oral Forms in Black South African Literature', unpublished paper, York, 1981.

¹⁰⁴ M. Xihoshi, 'Poetry Towards the Revolution', *Sechaba* (April 1981), p. 17. **[AQ12]**

¹⁰⁵ A. Sitas, 'Traditions of Poetry in Natal', in L. Gunner (ed.), *Politics and Performance* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1994), p. 146.

¹⁰⁶ Brown, 'Black Consciousness, Tradition and Modernity', p. 2.

¹⁰⁷ R. Rive, 'Interview with Richard Rive', in B. Lindfors (ed.), *Africa Talks Back* (Trenton, NJ, African World Press, 2002), p. 337.

more recent years, the performance and message of this initial collective has inspired current poets such as Lesego Rampolokeng – heavily influenced by Madingoane particularly – a poet who, I argue elsewhere, has established an *oeuvre* that epitomises a contemporary reincarnation of Black Consciousness ideology.¹⁰⁸

It is evident that the performance of Soweto poetry, and their authors' circulation within select literary networks and the *Staffrider* framework, ensured that Soweto poetry reached a new and generally younger black audience concentrated in the townships. Consequently, rather than simply reflecting a predetermined message, Soweto poetry was integral to creating a Black Consciousness message that had broad popular appeal and could successfully influence a new generation of activists.

Conclusion: A Medial Literature

Soweto poetry has, in most previous commentaries, been labelled as a poetry of response. For its role as a retaliation against the Nationalist hegemony and the enforced silence that had beset black writers, scholars have seen this *oeuvre* as being inspired and established in reaction to the rise of Black Consciousness. Embracing Biko's message of selfhood and identity, the Soweto poets reaffirmed the positive black experience and celebrated the contemporary successes of their generation. In this article, however, I have sought to reassess this image and instead insist on a more complex picture. By considering Soweto poetry's performative face alongside its aesthetic qualities, my argument demonstrates that Serote's, Sepamla's, Matthews' and Ndebele's work is not a pure reflection of an established Black Consciousness message but a dialogue that helped to create the ideology and extend its popular purchase.

Much as these writers' work attempts to reconcile the current urgency of the struggle and pressures of the present with a need to look back and reassess histories erased and prejudiced by the apartheid state, Soweto poetry occupies a middle ground between previous poetic styles and the Black Consciousness mould. Explorations of the urban are fused with an appreciation of the rural; hallmarks of a western literary canon are imbued with the spirit of various African cultural idioms; the English language is made malleable in order to establish a new register. And, finally, Soweto poetry's apparent appeal to a uniquely black audience is far from being based on a simple hatred of whites. Its dedication to African identity and experience is only rarely coupled with attacks on the white minority or expressed to the exclusion of a white readership. In sum, Soweto poetry is poetry in between, poetry of transition, progression and creation. This movement reflects the dynamic Soweto township that it loves, but also establishes an individual agency that creates a genre of African literature one step closer to Biko's ideal national culture. This achievement, combined with an aesthetic range and skill that must not simply be dismissed as anti-poetics, means that Chapman's praise for Soweto poetry is fitting: it was 'the most important socio-literary phenomenon in the seventies in South Africa'.¹⁰⁹

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¹⁰⁸ T. Penfold, 'Black Consciousness and the Politics of Writing the Nation in South Africa', PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2013.

¹⁰⁹ Chapman, *Soweto Poetry*, p. 11.