

Steve Biko and Black Consciousness in Post-Apartheid South African Poetry

A dissertation presented to
the faculty of
the College of Fine Arts of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy

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June 2010

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This dissertation titled
Steve Biko and Black Consciousness in Post-Apartheid South African Poetry

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ABSTRACT

MACDONALD, T. SPREELIN, Ph.D., June 2010, Interdisciplinary Arts

Steve Biko and Black Consciousness in Post-Apartheid South African Poetry (158 pp.)

Directors of Dissertation: Marina L. Peterson and Ghirmai Negash

This dissertation rethinks the legacy of the anti-apartheid leader Steve Biko (1946-1977) in terms of his influence upon post-apartheid South African poetry. Comparing Biko's own writings on Black Consciousness and the poetry of contemporary South African poets, I show that Biko's ideas have come to underpin a field of post-apartheid poetry that I call "Biko poems."

Two questions guide this investigation. First, what is it about Biko's legacy that avails itself so potently to poetic elaboration? That is, what does Biko's articulation of Black Consciousness offer that allows it to be so vigorously engaged within poetry?

I address this question in Chapter One, positing that Biko's early essays, published under the reoccurring title "I Write What I Like," and under the pen name "Frank Talk," model a form of performative writing crucial to his subsequent poetic legacy. In particular, I discuss the manners in which these essays construct Black Consciousness as the struggle to generate black political presence, and black writing as a crucial aspect of this struggle.

I thus assert that Biko's essays fuse the struggle within Black Consciousness for black political presence with the struggle within performative writing to "make absence presence," as Della Pollock has defined performative writing. Biko's essays can

accordingly be understood to open his legacy up to subsequent poetic elaboration, as they forward black writing as a key manner in which the struggle for black political presence can be enacted.

The subsequent chapters of this dissertation are motivated by a second question: if Biko's legacy allows for a potent understanding of black writing as crucial to the struggle to generate black political presence, what work does this understanding do in the present? I address this second question by examining the different manifestations of Biko's performative articulation of Black Consciousness in the work of contemporary poets.

In Chapter Two I examine the struggle within the work of Mphutlane wa Bofelo to redeem the performativity of Biko's legacy against Biko's appropriation as a symbol of elite privilege in the post-apartheid era. In Chapter Three, I examine the effort within the work of Bofelo and Kgafela oa Magogodi to leverage Biko's performativity to sanction contemporary black performance poetry.

In Chapter Four, I explore Vonani Bila's use of Biko's performativity to underwrite his development of a rural poetics. Finally, in Chapter Five, I discuss how this performative mandate to arise through self-determined struggle comes into tension with Biko's own haunting presence in the works of Bofelo, Magogodi, Bila, Bandile Gumbi and Lesego Rampolokeng. That is, I show that these "Biko poems" are propelled by their irresolvable effort to both employ Biko's performative precedent and escape it.

Collectively, then, I argue in this dissertation that Biko's performative articulation of blackness and black writing continues to animate contemporary South African poetry,

as poets both leverage and struggle with Biko's haunting specter in their efforts to performatively emerge in the present.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project in many ways began in 2002 when Choene Hanyane, a friend of mine in GaManamela, South Africa, loaned me a stack of contemporary South African jazz CDs: Jimmy Dlodlu, Jonas Gwangwa, Don Laka, and the African Jazz Pioneers, among others. As someone raised on the steady thump of rock and roll I was completely unprepared to decipher the flights of this complex music. While most of these CDs struck me as inscrutable, I was overcome by the sheer force of one of them, Tlokwe Sehume's *Naga ya fsa* (The Country is Burning). Over the years I have continually returned to this CD, and especially its haunting title track. "Naga ya fsa" laments the murder of Steve Biko, and promises that his afterlife will be disruptive, comparing Biko to a sleeping porcupine, ready to awake with fury. I've taken this track's refrain as the epigraph of this dissertation: "A ye ye ye/a tswele pele," Biko should go on an on, like the rhythm of a drum. I would like to thank Choene Hanyane for sharing this unsettling lament which has grown into a dissertation today.

There are many more people who have enabled this project to come to fruition that I would like to thank. The Directors of my dissertation committee, Marina Peterson and Ghirmai Negash, have given generously of their time and advice through this writing process. Moreover, they have served as important mentors throughout my graduate studies with their unflagging goodwill and intellectual honesty. William F. Condee and Michael Gillespie have also offered invaluable feedback as the other members of my dissertation committee, and this project bears the distinctive marks of their advice. Dr. Condee, as well as W. Stephen Howard and Dora Wilson, have served as Directors of Interdisciplinary Arts (Condee and Wilson) and Africa Studies (Howard) during my graduate studies, offering crucial guidance and financial support that has made the

completion of my graduate studies possible. Thank you for giving me this opportunity! Brenda Llewellyn in Interdisciplinary Arts and Acacia Nikoi in African Studies have patiently fixed my administrative crises. My academic advisor Andrea Frohne has constantly supported me through my Ph.D. studies, and Charles Buchanan has provided crucial feedback on a series of fellowship applications that made my research possible. Keith Harris and Alessandra Raengo validated the first stirrings of this project, and Ryan DeRosa provided thoughtful feedback in a proposal-writing seminar that was crucial in propelling early drafts of this dissertation. Thank you all for taking the time to develop my ideas and me.

There are a number of people who have given generously of their time, ideas, resources, and goodwill during my research, answering my emails and phone calls, entertaining my fledgling ideas sometimes for hours on end, and often providing me with materials otherwise unavailable to me. Among these precious souls are Vonani Bila, Makoena Pabale, Lesego Rampolokeng, Mphutlane wa Bofelo, Fokisa N'wa-Mahatlani, Dr. Tlhalo Raditlhalo, Bobby Rodwell, Nelisiwe Xaba, Bandile Gumbi, Liepollo Rantekoa, Aryan Kaganof, Fouad Asfour, and Dr. Harry Elam Jr. I would also like to thank my taxi driver, Bizmark, who ferried me safely between Hillbrow, Newtown, Observatory, and Kempton Park with good humor. Thank you all for your graciousness, and for listening to me.

I would also like to thank my extended family throughout South Africa and the United States for their constant support, especially the Beckers, Griffuses, MacDonalds, Malebatjas, Mamogales, Masenyas, Molotos, Pabales, and Prathers. In Athens, life has been possible and inspirational with the friendship of Eric Weiss, Barbara and Warren

Tucker, Zelma Badu-Young and Paschal Young, Abdullah Mohammed, and Gugu Nkosi, Zakes Mda, and their family.

Most importantly, I have lived off the love of my wife Tsibishi, and our daughters Nthabeleng and Bohlale, who embrace me with or without my politics. Thank you for sticking with me despite the constant deferral of home, rest, money and my attention. Moreover, I would like to thank Tsibishi for double-checking many of my translations here. Your reoccurring question, “You think that means what?,” keeps me on my toes. *Ke a le rata.*

Portions of this project were researched and written under the funding of the I. Hollis Parry/Ann Parry Billman Fine Arts Award, the Anthony Trisolini Graduate Fellowship, and a travel grant from the Steve Howard Travel Fund. I would like to thank the College of Fine Arts of Ohio University, the Graduate College of Ohio University, and W. Stephen Howard, respectively, for these vital awards.

An earlier iteration of the general thesis of this study is due to appear elsewhere in my forthcoming book chapter, “The Emergent Self in Black Consciousness Literature and Discourse,” in *Intellectuals and African Decolonization*, which I am co-editing with Nicholas M. Creary and Marlene De La Cruz-Guzmán (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press). Portions of Chapter 3 of this dissertation are due to appear elsewhere in my forthcoming book chapter, “Vonani Bila and the ‘Rural’ in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” in *Returning to the Sources: New Critical Perspectives on African Indigenous Knowledges*, Ed. Nicholas Creary (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing).

For my best friend and wife, Tsibishi

and

In memory of Collins Masenya, who tried to teach a young me how to dance “siguqa ngamadolo,” whistle at girlfriends’ gates at night, and other temporary survival skills in the slums of Moletjie. Robala ka kgotso, buti.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ANC: African National Congress

BC: Black Consciousness

BCM: Black Consciousness Movement

BEE: Black Economic Empowerment

BPC: Black People's Convention

NUSAS: National Union of South African Students

SASO: South African Students Organisation

UNNE/UNB: University of Natal Non-European Section/University of Natal Black

Section

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EPIGRAPH

A ye ye ye

A tswele pele

[Biko should go on and on]

Tlokwe Sehume & Medu, “Naga ya fsa”

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation rethinks the legacy of the anti-apartheid leader Stephen (“Steve”) Bantu Biko (1946-1977) in terms of his influence upon post-apartheid¹ South African poetry. While there is little scholarship concerned with this aspect of Biko’s legacy, Biko’s intellectual imprint is readily apparent in the “Biko poems”² of prominent contemporary poets such as Vonani Bila, Mphutlane wa Bofelo, Lesego Rampolokeng, Bandile Gumbi, and Kgafela oa Magogodi. Accordingly, in this study I compare Biko’s own writings on Black Consciousness with the poetry of post-apartheid South African poets, seeking to understand the ways in which Biko’s legacy avails itself to contemporary poetic elaboration.

Steve Biko rose to prominence in the late 1960s and 1970s as a leader of the South African Students’ Organisation (SASO), and through his essays and activism subsequently established himself as one of South Africa’s most influential public figures. By the time of his 1977 assassination by the South African government, Biko had become the chief intellectual exponent of South African Black Consciousness, a philosophy which dramatically redefined racial politics in South Africa. Biko envisioned Black Consciousness as a politics of self-determination by the historically oppressed, based upon an “inward-looking process” through which blackness could be forged as an

¹ The formal policies of racial segregation known as “apartheid” (literally meaning apart-ness in Afrikaans) lasted from 1948 until 1994. Accordingly, the post-apartheid era began with the 1994 institution of multi-racial democracy.

² In collectively labeling these contemporary poems concerned with Biko’s legacy “Biko poems,” I follow the example of Kimberly Benston’s similar analysis of “Coltrane poems,” those of the Black Arts Movement concerned with the posthumous import of John Coltrane. Kimberly Benston, *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 144-186.

autonomous, emancipating politics.³ Biko developed this vision of Black Consciousness in a series of essays written between the late 1960s and his assassination in 1977, a period which saw the revitalization of black dissidence within South Africa.⁴

Black Consciousness thus arose as an attempt to produce black politics in an antiblack⁵ context in which, Biko argued, the oppressed person of the apartheid era had become, “a man only in form [...] a shell, a shadow of a man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity.”⁶ Biko accordingly turned his attention to counteracting the fatalism that led black South Africans to accept their “inevitable position” of being dominated:

The first step therefore is to make the black man come to himself; to pump life back into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity, to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of his

³ Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like* (New York: Harper and Row, 2002 [1978]) 29.

⁴ Black Consciousness arose in the midst of the banning, jailing, exiling, and killing of black politicians and parties rigorously perpetuated by the apartheid government from its ascendance in 1948. In the “political vacuum” created by the near erasure of black political parties, such as the African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress, during the first two decades of apartheid, Black Consciousness assumed the mantle as the leading black political movement within the country from the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, until its own heavy suppression by the apartheid state. Andile Mngxitama, Amanda Alexander and Nigel Gibson, “Biko Lives,” *Biko Lives!: Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko*, eds. Andile Mngxitama, et al. (New York: Palgrave, 2008) 4-5.

⁵ Lewis Gordon has prominently developed the term “antiblack racism” to describe the process whereby people of color are rendered politically and culturally absent in the modern world. I discuss this concept and its connections with Biko’s thought further in Chapters 1, 2, and 3. Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1995).

⁶ Biko, *I Write* 28-29.

birth. This is what we mean by an inward-looking process. This is the definition of “Black Consciousness.”⁷

In Biko’s definition, Black Consciousness was thus synonymous with an “inward looking process,” through which blackness had to be practiced in order to be realized.

Accordingly, blackness accrued the qualities of the processual, historical, and performed. Biko thus severed blackness (and race in general) from its a-historical determination as an inherent biological essence. Rejecting the essentialist racial differentiations that apartheid was constructed upon, Black Consciousness forwarded an understanding of blackness attuned to its own historical construction as an emancipatory politics.⁸

By constituting blackness in terms of processual struggle, Black Consciousness accordingly emerged as a tremendous rupture in the South African racial imagination, denaturalizing racial identities and interpolating into this dispensation blackness as a disruptive political force. It is in these terms that Prishani Naidoo and Ahmed Veriava describe Biko’s politics as predicated upon a “nonessentialist and open-ended understanding of struggle rooted in the common experience of oppression, that sought not to mimic white society, but to inaugurate something completely different.”⁹ One could crucially add that in seeking to “inaugurate something completely different” Black Consciousness sought not to impose a Manichean struggle between blackness and whiteness by simply inverting the terms of the apartheid racial binary. Rather, as Mafika

⁷ Biko, *I Write* 29.

⁸ Mabogo More, “Biko: Black Existential Philosopher,” *Biko Lives!: Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko*, eds. Andile Mngxitama, et al. (New York: Palgrave, 2008) 55-56.

⁹ Veriava and Naidoo, 246.

Pascal Gwala put it in his 1977 poem “Getting off the ride,” Black Consciousness strove for an “energetic release from the shackles of Kaffir, Bantu,/non-white.”¹⁰ In the apartheid context, such derogatory terms (“Kaffir,” “Bantu,” and “non-white”) were used to fasten the majority of the population in a negative relation to whiteness. In discarding these terms, Black Consciousness thus enacted a shift from essence to process in the construction of South African racial identities, positing blackness as an open-ended politics, fundamentally affective of new potentialities.

As this reference to Gwala’s poetry indicates, Black Consciousness heavily influenced the writing and performance of South African poetry during Biko’s lifetime. Prominent poets of the 1970s such as Gwala, Ingoapele Madingoane, Lefifi Tladi, and Mongane Wally Serote, as well as the arts collectives with which many were associated, such as Dashiki¹¹ and Medupe, engaged Black Consciousness alongside a number of influential Black Consciousness-aligned political organizations, such as SASO and the Black People’s Convention (BPC). Collectively this broader movement was known as the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). Yet, despite Biko’s central role in the rise of Black Consciousness and the BCM, and their widely observed impact upon South African poetry, curiously, few studies chart Biko’s or Black Consciousness’ posthumous poetic import in South Africa. With Biko’s 1977 assassination and the subsequent banning of BCM organizations by the apartheid state, Black Consciousness is generally

¹⁰ Mafika Pascal Gwala, “Getting off the ride,” *Jol’Inkomo* (Johannesburg: A.D. Donker, 1977) 67.

¹¹ For a brief but rich retrospective of Dashiki, see *Giant Steps*, dir. Geoff Mphakati & Aryan Kaganof, African Noise Foundation, 2005.

assumed to have evaporated as a cultural and political phenomenon by the early 1980s, even termed an historical “failure”¹² by some scholars. Indeed, the list of studies that characterize Black Consciousness literature as limited to the 1970s is nearly co-extensive with the number of studies that engage Black Consciousness at all as a literary phenomenon. That is, while there are a number of studies of South African literature that broach the topic of Black Consciousness, such as those by Atwell (2005), Brown (1998), Chapman (1996, 2006), Heywood (2004), and Wenzel (2009),¹³ they almost categorically share this same limited periodization of Black Consciousness literature as a literature of the 1970s.¹⁴

¹² Studies that explicitly name Black Consciousness as a failure are few, but conspicuous. For a general indictment of Black Consciousness and the Black Consciousness Movement as a collective “failure” see David Howarth, “The Difficult Emergence of a Democratic Imaginary: Black Consciousness and Non-Racial Democracy in South Africa,” *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, Hegemonies and Social Change*, eds. David Howarth, et al. (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000) 168-192. For a specific discussion of the “failure” of Black Consciousness in literature (which heavily borrows from Howarth’s analysis) see Johan Geertsema, “Ndebele, Fanon, Agency and Irony,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30.4 (2004): 749-763.

¹³ David Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History*. (Scottsville, South Africa: U KwaZulu-Natal P, 2005). Duncan Brown, *Voicing the Text: South African Oral Poetry and Performance* (Cape Town: Oxford UP, 1998). Michael Chapman, *Southern African Literatures* (London: Longman, 1996). Michael Chapman *Art Talk, Politics Talk* (Scottsville, South Africa: U KwaZulu-Natal P, 2006). Christopher Heywood, *A History of South African Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004). Jennifer Wenzel, *Bulletproof: Afterlives of Anticolonial Prophecy in South Africa and Beyond* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 2009).

¹⁴ There are passing comments in contemporary scholarship that suggest the ongoing import of Black Consciousness to South African literature, but with little accompanying critical examination of this phenomenon. For example, in his Preface to the 2007 re-issue of his 1982 edited volume *Soweto Poetry: Literary Perspectives* (Scottsville, South Africa: U KwaZulu-Natal P), Michael Chapman briefly mentions that the Black Consciousness-aligned “Soweto poetry” of the 1970s “presaged a new generation of oral-based South African poetry in the contemporary poetry of

The only study I am aware of that addresses Biko's and Black Consciousness' literary import in the post-apartheid era is Mphutlane wa Bofelo's recent essay, "The Influences and Representations of Biko and Black Consciousness in Apartheid and Postapartheid South Africa/Azania."¹⁵ Though it provides a valuable survey of the broader field of Black Consciousness literature past and present, Bofelo's essay is a *survey*, and is thus largely limited in its analysis to listing general themes and authors associated with this phenomenon. Yet, Bofelo's motivation for authoring this essay is

Seitlhamo Motsapi, Lesego Rampolokeng, Kgafela oa Magogodi, and others" (1). In a footnote, Rita Barnard makes a similar passing remark about the continual influence of Black Consciousness upon the (largely autobiographical and ethnographic) writing of the Biko's former colleague, Mamphela Ramphele, stating that "Ramphele's emphasis on psychological space marks her ongoing allegiance to certain aspects of Black Consciousness, especially its emphasis on self-affirmation and psychological decolonization." See Rita Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007) 200 nt. 11. Like Barnard's reference to Ramphele's continuing engagement with Black Consciousness over the decades, there are studies that do entertain the relationship between Black Consciousness and the work of Njabulo Ndebele, a writer who was active in the Black Consciousness Movement and whose literary output spans the apartheid and post-apartheid eras. Yet these studies tend to cast Ndebele as a writer who has moved beyond Biko's and Black Consciousness' influence since the 1970s, thus leaving aside considerations of Biko and Black Consciousness' continuing influence. See Attwell (2005), Geertsema (2004), and Mark Sanders (2002). While, in an attempt to draw attention to the engagement with Biko's legacy by a younger generation of post-apartheid writers, I have chosen not to focus upon Ndebele's work in this dissertation, it remains instructive to note that, rather than seeing himself as moving beyond Black Consciousness, Ndebele has overtly indicated his continuing preoccupation with Biko as an intellectual and literary influence upon him, for example, stating in 2000, that he "locate[s] this search" for a way into South Africa's future "in the realm of consciousness: something that Steve Bantu Biko struggled with intensely in his brief but dramatic life." Njabulo Ndebele, "Iph' Indlela? Finding our Way into the Future'—The First Steve Biko Memorial Lecture" *Social Dynamics* (26.1 2000) 45.

¹⁵ Mphutlane wa Bofelo, "The Influences and Representations of Biko and Black Consciousness in Apartheid and Postapartheid South Africa/Azania," *Biko Lives!: Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko*, eds. Andile Mngxitama, et al. (New York: Palgrave, 2008) 191-212.

telling in its own right. While, as Bofelo stated to me in an August 2009 interview, he sees himself as “basically a writer and a social activist,” and certainly not an academic, he has been motivated to write this and a number of other scholarly essays recently because,

I have found that there is some sense of amnesia in the circles of academia, as well as political officialdom, in recording the history of South Africa, and an omission specifically of the contributions of the Black Consciousness philosophy and the Black Consciousness Movement in that [history], and how BC played a critical role in the development of South African literature from the 70s onward. So I felt that it was important for practitioners of literature and the arts who have been influenced by Black Consciousness to speak in their own voice about their own take on Black Consciousness and as to whether they feel they have views to express on the relevancy of BC in this time and the notion of updating BC to the present context.¹⁶

The very grounds for Mphutlane wa Bofelo’s growing body of critical work thus indicate a conspicuous detachment between contemporary poetry and scholarship, in that while there is an apparently crucial engagement with Biko’s legacy by poets such as Bila,

¹⁶ Mphutlane wa Bofelo, interview with T. Spreelin MacDonald, 22 August 2009. In addition to “The Influences and Representations of Biko and Black Consciousness in Apartheid and Postapartheid South Africa/Azania,” Bofelo has published articles on websites such as Pambazuka News [<http://www.pambazuka.org/en/>], and his most recent book, *Bluesology & Bofelosophy: Poetry & Essays* (Braamfontein, South Africa: Botsotso, 2008), includes a number of essays on literature, politics, and popular culture.

Gumbi, Magogodi, Rampolokeng, and himself, this phenomenon remains largely unexamined within scholarship of contemporary South African poetry.

It is this lacuna in scholarship that I address in this dissertation. Considering post-apartheid South African poetry through its engagements with Biko's legacy, two fundamental questions arise, guiding this study. First, what it is about Biko's legacy that avails itself so potently to poetic elaboration? That is, what does Biko's articulation of Black Consciousness offer that allows it to be so vigorously engaged within contemporary poetry? I address this question in Chapter One, positing that Biko's early essays, published under the reoccurring title "I Write What I Like," and under the pen name "Frank Talk," model a form of performative¹⁷ writing crucial to his subsequent poetic legacy. In particular, I discuss the manners in which these essays construct Black Consciousness as the struggle to generate black political presence, and black writing as a crucial aspect of this struggle. I thus assert that Biko's essays fuse the struggle within Black Consciousness for black political presence with the struggle within performative

¹⁷ While the term "performative" has accrued mixed, even conflicting interpretations and applications across a range of discourses, I employ this term throughout this dissertation to denote the manner in which Biko's essays and subsequent Biko poems, draw attention to their own event-like nature, and to the fact that they are enacting struggles to realize black political presence. Biko poems thus leverage a performative understanding of blackness, not as "external [...] to the works themselves," but as enacted or performed in the poems (Benston, 4-5). For a survey of the "cross-purposes" of "performativity" within contemporary scholarship see Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedwick, "Introduction: Performativity and Performance," *Performativity and Performance*, ed. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedwick (New York: Routledge, 1995) 1-18.

¹⁷ Annie E. Coombes, *Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa* (Durham: Duke UP, 2001) 14.

writing to “make absence presence.”¹⁸ Investing black writing with the effort to enact political presence, Biko’s essays harness the performative capacity of words, “screams”¹⁹ and other utterances to “do things,”²⁰ and to function as “actions in themselves” through which black politics is enacted.²¹ I thus argue in Chapter One that Biko’s essays open his legacy up to poetic elaboration, as they suggest black writing as a key manner in which the struggle for black political presence can be waged.

The subsequent chapters of this dissertation are motivated by a second question: if Biko’s legacy allows for a potent performative understanding of black writing as crucial to the struggle to generate black political presence, what work does this understanding of black writing do in the present? That is, in what manners does black performativity manifest in post-apartheid Biko poems? I set the stage for this inquiry in Chapter Two by showing that Biko is commonly invoked in these poems as a site of struggle in which “symbolic transactions” are carried out over the nature and value of blackness and black poetics in the post-apartheid era.²² Through an analysis of Mphutlane wa Bofelo’s poem “Conversation with Bob Marley,” I show that this struggle arises in contemporary Biko poems as the effort to reclaim the transgressive, performative aspects of Biko’s legacy against his posthumous appropriation as a symbol of elite privilege, the normalization²³

¹⁸ Della Pollock, “Performative Writing,” *The Ends of Performance*, eds. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York: New York UP, 1998) 81.

¹⁹ Veriava and Naidoo 250, *passim*.

²⁰ J.L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP) 1962.

²¹ James Loxley, *Performativity* (New York: Routledge, 2007) 2.

²² Annie E. Coombes, *Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa* (Durham: Duke UP, 2001) 14.

²³ Anthony O’Brien, *Against Normalization: Writing Radical Democracy in South Africa* (Durham: Duke UP, 2001).

of injustices in the post-apartheid order, and shallow poetry that buttresses this conservativeness. I thus argue in Chapter Two that Biko poems are inscribed with a productive effort to summon Biko as an index of a politically and aesthetically transgressive understanding of blackness and black poetics in the face of his political and aesthetic ossification in the post-apartheid era.

Chapter Three delves deeper into this struggle, as it manifests within contemporary performance poetry. I examine the manners in which Mphutlane wa Bofelo and Kgafela oa Magogodi trope upon Biko's name and essays in their performance poetry, reflexively fore-fronting the performance of poetry as the enactment of transgressive black politics in the face of contemporary antiblackness. This struggle impresses itself on these poems in two manners. It arises first of all as the effort to transcend the presence-eroding weight of antiblackness in the performance of poetry. This manifests in these poems as a preoccupation with being "heard" through self-determined performance. Thus, these poems resound with references to the performative effort to overcome the silencing, absenting powers of racism. Yet, I also show that these poets' struggle to assume a presence through performance poetry is complicated by their sensitivity to the danger of lapsing into a poetics of blind praise or "monumentalization"²⁴ of Biko. While seeming to protect Biko and blackness against the eroding gravity of antiblack racism, monumentalization avails itself as a poetic mode that ossifies Biko and black poetics, undermining the open-ended, processual imperative of Black Consciousness. Highlighting the manners in which these poems attempt to make

²⁴ Benston 151.

Biko and Black Consciousness speak anew from the margins of contemporary South African existence—what Ahmed Veriava and Prishani Naidoo call the “labor of the scream”²⁵—I accordingly assert that these poems eschew Biko’s monumentalization, while constructing contemporary performance poetry through Biko’s performative precedent.

Chapter Four addresses the manners in which Vonani Bila’s rural poetry engages Biko in developing a rural black poetics. Rejecting Biko’s contemporary monumentalization as an icon of elite privilege and aesthetic conservatism, Bila leverages Biko as a symbol of the struggle to write from the rural margins. This chapter accordingly considers the manners in which Biko’s performative definition of Black Consciousness enables Bila to reflexively construct the rural poet’s role as a witness of otherwise absent rural subjects. Furthermore, through Biko’s logic of black performativity, Bila seeks to posit his own creative consciousness as independent and evolving, agitating against its ossification. Chapter Four thus ultimately demonstrates that Bila’s poetic struggle for rural presence is animated by the performative “inward-looking process” developed in Biko’s essays.

Chapter Five carries this inquiry further into the absence/presence qualities of Biko poems by considering the dynamics that arise when poets encounter Biko as a spectral, haunting factor in their poetry. Considering the works of Bila, Bandile Gumbi, and Lesego Rampolokeng, I show that Biko’s spectrality arises as a point of anxiety in these poems, as this haunting in some ways disrupts these poets’ claims to be self-

²⁵ Veriava and Naidoo 250.

determining, and their poetry to performatively arise from absence. That is, these poets agitate within what Jacques Derrida calls the “strange commitment” of coming to political (and here poetic) life. This commitment both requires a dedication to being self-determined (as Black Consciousness is), and the “hauntological” mediation of ghosts, through and against which this coming to life is pursued. Thus, while these poets struggle to performatively enact poetic self-determination in the present, they can only achieve such declarations through the mediation of Biko’s precedent. Accordingly, the performative self-determination so fundamental to Biko poems is paradoxically fused with a debt to Biko as the sign under which such performativity moves. But rather than an inherent flaw in this field of poetry, I argue that this agitation between precedent and self-determination arises as a productive anxiety in Biko poems. As Derrida suggests that life and justice can only be realized through the “strange” agitation between self and specter, this poetry unfolds as the product of the conflicting mandate of Biko’s legacy, to performatively struggle for self-determination through a ghostly debt to Biko.

CHAPTER 1: STEVE BIKO'S POETICS

*“blackness is always a disruptive surprise moving
in the rich nonfullness of every term it modifies”*

Fred Moten²⁶

The lasting impact of Steve Biko's life and ideas upon post-apartheid South African literature is rarely remarked within scholarship. As I outline above in the Introduction, although Biko and Black Consciousness are widely regarded to have had a tremendous impact upon South African literature of the 1970s, there is virtually no academic discourse upon Biko's subsequent poetic legacy. I seek to show in this chapter that Biko's own writings develop an understanding of black writing that enables Biko's legacy to serve as a site of ongoing poetic elaboration. I find this potential in those essays in which Biko outlined his articulation of Black Consciousness, particularly those early essays published under the reoccurring title “I Write What I Like,” and under the pen name “Frank Talk” (hereafter referred to in this study as I Write/Frank Talk essays). I trace out the manners in which these essays reflexively posit black writing as a mode of performatively enacting black political presence. As such, Biko's essays can be seen to be sites of poetic innovation that fuse the struggle for black political presence—the central mandate of Black Consciousness—with the practice of black writing.

While a medical student at the University of Natal Non-European Section (UNNE)²⁷ in the late 1960s, Biko rose to prominence as a leader of the South African

²⁶ Fred Moten. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: U of Minneapolis P, 2003) 255.

Students Organisation (SASO), first as its first President, and later at its Chairman of Publications. SASO was an all-black student organization that gained international notoriety when it broke away from the nominally multiracial National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) in 1968. Biko and other black students had long chafed within the structures of NUSAS, which many felt were racist. Biko, who had himself arrived at UNNE as a strong proponent of non-racial approaches to fighting apartheid, grew to find that NUSAS' non-racialism²⁸ masked a strong racial hierarchy, weighted against black participation and leadership:²⁹

I realized that for a long time I had been holding onto the whole dogma of non-racism almost like a religion, feeling that it was sacrilegious to question it, and therefore not accommodating the attacks I was getting from other students. I began to feel there was a lot lacking in the proponents of the non-racist idea, that much as they were adhering to this impressive idea they were in fact subject to their own experience back home. They had this problem, you know, of superiority, and they tended to take us for granted and wanted us to accept things that were second-class.

²⁷ Also called University of Natal Black (UNB).

²⁸ Biko later defined South African non-racialism (which he also called non-racism) as typified by those "multiracial political organisations and parties and the "nonracial" student organisations, all of which insist on integration not only as an end but also as a means" (*I Write* 20). In short, non-racialism can be defined as the principal of color-blindness, whereby it is expected that racism can be defeated by not openly acknowledging race as a constitutive part of relations or reality. See David Theo Goldberg, *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) 318.

²⁹ Lindy Wilson, "Bantu Stephen Biko: A Life," *Bounds of Possibility: The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, eds. Barney Pityana et al. (Cape Town: David Philip, 1991) 22-23.

[...] I began to feel that our understanding of our own situation in this country was not coincidental with that of these liberal whites.³⁰

Sidelined within NUSAS, black students were, in Biko's terms, "taking a back seat in our own battle" against apartheid. "We are making ourselves watchers—we are watching the match from the touchlines, whereas it's a match in which we ought to be participating, primarily."³¹ Constantly butting up against entrenched racism within NUSAS, Biko came to realize that it "was a dead organization; it wouldn't listen to us."³²

A key aspect of black students' experiences of alienation within NUSAS revolved around the use of English as its language of operation. For many black students, the vast majority of whom did not speak English as a first language, attempting to communicate on equal terms with their white counterparts in English caused not only discomfort, but reinforced their position of inferiority within the organization. This issue became particularly embittering when NUSAS directly addressed black experiences of apartheid. With whites dominating these discussions, "It was an extraordinary experience for blacks to listen to their own lives being articulated by whites," Lindy Wilson has observed, "who had had an infinitely superior [formal] education, yet had had no experience of the reality"³³ of black life under apartheid.

³⁰ Steve Biko, qtd. in Donald Woods, *Biko: The True Story of the Young South African Martyr and His Struggle to Raise Black Consciousness* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1991 [1978]) 153-154.

³¹ Steve Biko, interview with Gail M. Gerhart, *Biko Lives!: Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko*. eds. Andile Mngxitama, et al. (New York: Palgrave, 2008) 23.

³² Biko, interview with Gail M. Gerhart 22.

³³ Wilson 23.

As Biko explained,

white students would be discussing something that you, as a black man, had experienced in your day-to-day life, but your powers of articulation were not as good as theirs. Also you have among the white students a number of students doing M.A., doing Honors,³⁴ highly articulate, very intelligent. You may be intelligent but not as articulate. You are forced into a subservient role of having to say “yes” to what they are saying, even when talking about what you have experienced, and which they have not experienced, because you cannot express it so well. This in a sense inculcates also in many black students a sense of inadequacy. You tend to think that it is not just a matter of language. You tend to tie it up also with intelligence, in a sense. You tend to feel that that guy is better equipped than you mentally.³⁵

This linguistic disjuncture raises a critique of white liberals³⁶ and non-racialism (also called liberalism by Biko) that runs through all of Biko’s writings: rather than inherently

³⁴ In the South African higher education (tertiary) system, Honours (Honors) is the level of study following the Bachelor’s level and preceding the Master’s level.

³⁵ Biko, qtd. in Woods 168-169.

³⁶ Liberals, in the context of Biko’s writings, can generally be understood as “that group of whites who purported to support the struggle for liberation,” Nurina Ally and Shireen Ally observe, but who were identified by Black Consciousness as “the primary obstacles to independent black initiative and organization,” in that their non-racialism/multi-racialism/liberalism (all of which gloss together in Biko’s writings) was seen to mask their dominance over black people, and their ultimate unwillingness to concede to black leadership in the anti-apartheid struggle. Nurina Ally and Shireen Ally, “Critical Intellectualism: The Role of Black Consciousness in Reconfiguring the Race-Class Problematic in South Africa,” *Biko Lives! Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko*. eds. Andile Mngxitama, et al. (New York: Palgrave, 2008) 173.

break down racial hierarchies (racism), Biko sees non-racialism as reproducing racism by masking its effects within the machinations of nominally non-racial relationships.

Defined by David Theo Goldberg as the act of “tak[ing] a stand, instrumental or institutional, against a concept, a name, a category, a categorizing,”³⁷ non-racialism can be understood as the defining relationships through the expulsion of racial analysis. As such, non-racialism “does not itself involve standing (up) against (a set of) conditions of being or living,” constituted or heavily determined by racism,³⁸ but simply involves not talking about race. Non-racial relationships can accordingly be seen to be marked by a primary commitment to the nominal equality of all parties involved, regardless of the degrees to which racism may variably affect these parties. Thus, as Andile Mngxitama has observed, in antiblack societies historically determined by racist relationships, non-racialism “inevitably leads to accommodation with white supremacy”³⁹ rather than its removal, because non-racialism fundamentally avoids any critical engagement with racism and, therefore, white supremacy.

³⁷ Goldberg 10. Goldberg uses the term “antiracialism,” but in terms of his analysis, this term is interchangeable with Biko’s use of “non-racialism,” “multi-racialism” and “liberalism.” In contrast to non-racialism/antiracialism, *antiracism* can be understood, in Goldberg’s terms, as more descriptive of Biko’s position, in that the term “conjures a stance against an imposed condition, or set of conditions, an explicit refusal or a living of one’s life in such a way one refuses the imposition [...] It is an insistence that one not be reduced, at least not completely, to or by the implications marked by the imposition and constraint,” being here racism (Goldberg 10).

³⁸ Goldberg 10.

³⁹ Andile Mngxitama, “Why Steve Biko Wouldn’t Vote,” *Pambazuka News* 428 (2009), 7 December 2009 < <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/comment/55639>>.

It is thus not surprising that Biko's critique extended beyond the use of English within NUSAS, addressing other operations that reinforced a racial hierarchy within the organization. In particular, Biko criticized NUSAS' insistence upon holding their yearly conferences in venues that black students did not have equal access to illuminate the organization's implicit support of racial segregation. For example, while black students were allowed to attend official NUSAS sessions, they were not allowed to lodge along with white delegates, and thus they were excluded from many of the important informal activities that white students, including the NUSAS executive, held after-hours in their residences. As Biko explained, "there would be private student parties in the residences where blacks were not allowed to come in, and there you would find officials of NUSAS. These were the things that made blacks begin to feel that the attachment of liberal students to nonracialism was shaky."⁴⁰ These experiences thus evinced for Biko and other black delegates the political impotency and even complicity of NUSAS' non-racialism in addressing the antiblackness that fundamentally disallowed their own equitable participation within the organization.

These issues began to come to a head during the 1967 NUSAS conference at Rhodes University, a white university in Grahamstown. On the train ride to the conference, Biko and the other black delegates from the University of Natal discussed the promise that had been forwarded to them by the NUSAS executive that this would be the first fully integrated NUSAS conference, including student lodging. A consensus was reached among these black delegates that "if this condition was not met we would

⁴⁰ Biko, qtd. in Woods 152.

register our protest, withdraw from the conference, and go home.” Upon their arrival at Rhodes University, they discovered to their consternation that students would in fact be housed in segregated quarters, with black students put up at a church.⁴¹ While a walkout of black members was eventually thwarted when the NUSAS executive placed the blame for the black students’ segregation on the University Council at Rhodes and issued an official complaint to the university, this experience nonetheless fueled a push to establish an organization in which black students could fully participate.⁴²

Biko’s views, in particular, were deeply impacted by these events. Immediately after the 1967 NUSAS conference, Biko travelled to meet with fellow student leader Barney Pityana, who had not attended the conference.⁴³ According to Pityana,

We literally sat in my room for probably the whole night and he was talking through his annoyance and what I was saying to myself was: “Why did you go? You must have known before you went that it would be like that, that nothing is really different and if you did go you were naïve to have expected anything different!”⁴⁴

While Pityana had evidently already given up on the possibility of realizing any constructive action within liberal institutions before the 1967 NUSAS conference, this experience of exclusion at Rhodes seems to have divested Biko of the final shreds of his faith in non-racialism, and fueled his ascendance to a leading role in organizing what would soon become the South African Students’ Organisation (SASO).

⁴¹ Biko, qtd. in Woods 152-153.

⁴² Biko, qtd. in Woods 153.

⁴³ Wilson 23.

⁴⁴ Barney Pityana, qtd. in Wilson 23.

In a 1976 trial of a number of SASO members (not including Biko), Biko was called to testify. In his remarks from the stand, Biko identified these events as key to the rise of SASO, relating that soon after the 1967 NUSAS conference, he “began to share the Rhodes experience with a number of black students [such as Pityana, presumably], first on my campus and then elsewhere, and at that time there began to emerge some kind of creative thought” that black students “have to look positively at what we can do as black students.” Collectively, these students “began to feel there was a need for some kind of consultation among black students which focused on their problems as black students on the campuses.”⁴⁵ By the 1968 NUSAS conference, Biko and other black student leaders had thus already begun to formulate the outlines of the ideas of self-determination from which SASO would be formed. Upon arriving at the 1968 NUSAS conference in Johannesburg, this direction was reinforced by their observation that black participation there was again very marginal.⁴⁶ By the end of 1968 a consensus was reached among many black student activists that a national black students’ organization was needed. This organization formally came into existence as SASO during a December 1968 meeting of student delegates at Mariannhill.⁴⁷ In July 1969, SASO held its first official conference at the black University of the North in Turfloop, at which Biko was elected as its first President.⁴⁸

From its beginning, SASO expressed the basic premise of black self-determination that Biko would soon go on to elaborate as the philosophy of Black

⁴⁵ Steve Biko, qtd. in Woods 154.

⁴⁶ Biko, qtd. in Woods 154.

⁴⁷ Biko, *I Write* 3, 11.

⁴⁸ Biko, *I Write* 3; Biko, qtd. in Woods 155-157.

Consciousness. This is evident in Biko's first address as the President of SASO, delivered at UNNE in December 1969, in which he observed that,

It seems sometimes that it is a crime for the non-white students to think for themselves. The idea of everything being done for the blacks is an old one and all liberals take pride in it; but once the black students want to do things for themselves suddenly they are regarded as becoming "militant."⁴⁹

In terms of the logic of Biko's argument, identifying this double standard served to illustrate the inherent paternalism and fear of black power inscribed within NUSAS and other liberal institutions. This shored up SASO's *raison d'être* by proving that black independence could not be fostered through liberal-dominated institutions or non-racial approaches. While Biko somewhat rejected the "militant" label, it is evident that he was of the opinion that fomenting a self-determined rejection of racial subjugation was the reason for SASO's founding, as he further explained in his first Presidential address:

what SASO has done is simply to take stock of the present scene in the country and to realise that not unless the non-white students decide to lift themselves from the doldrums will they ever hope to get out of them. What we want is not black visibility but real black participation. In other words it does not help us to see several quiet black faces in a multiracial

⁴⁹ Biko, *I Write 4*.

student gathering which ultimately concentrates on what white students believe are the needs for the black students.⁵⁰

As such, the rejection of non-racialism was clearly fundamental to SASO's founding. Perpetually sidelined by institutions nominally devoted to their struggles, yet dominated by "what white students believe are the needs of black students," non-racialism was simply seen by Biko and his cohort to not be a political solution to apartheid.

As a key component of forging a new self-determined response to apartheid, SASO soon rejected "non-white" as a suitable political identity. In its use of both "non-white" and "black" to describe South Africans of color, the above passage accordingly highlights the transformational nature of this period in SASO's and Biko's development. A new grammar of race was arising in South Africa, and SASO soon completely replaced the term "non-white" with "black." "Students took a decision that they would no longer use the term "nonwhite," nor allow it to be used as a description of them, because they saw it as a negation of their being," Biko later stated. "They were being stated as non-something, which implied that the standard was something and they were not that particular standard," a standard which was, in apartheid South Africa, whiteness. Students accordingly "felt that a positive view of life commensurate with the build-up of one's dignity and confidence should be contained in positive description, and they replaced the term "nonwhite" with the term "black.""⁵¹

⁵⁰ Biko, *I Write 5*.

⁵¹ Biko, qtd. in Woods 157.

While SASO continued to employ the term “non-white” in some instances until the early 1970s, this growing logic of positive self assertion found both in the organizational manifestation of SASO and in the new identity of self-defined blackness is evident in a 1970 letter to student leaders that Biko composed as the SASO President, in which he summarized the basic premises of SASO:

1. To crystallize the needs and aspirations of the non-white students and to seek to make known their grievances.
2. Where possible to put into effect programmes designed to meet the needs of the non-white students and to act on a collective basis in an effort to solve some of the problems which beset the centres individually.
3. To heighten the degree of contact not only amongst the non-white but also amongst these and the rest of the South African student population to make the non-white students accepted on their own terms as an integral part of the South African community.
4. To establish a solid identity amongst the non-white students and to ensure that these students are always treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.
5. To protect the interest of the member centres and to act as a pressure group on all institutions and organisations for the benefit of non-white students.

6. To boost up the morale of the non-white students, to heighten their own confidence in themselves and to contribute largely to the direction of thought taken by the various institutions on social, political and other current topics.

While these aims might appear to be couched in racist language, they are in fact a sign that the black student community has at last lost faith with their white counterparts and is now withdrawing from the open society.

The blacks are tired of standing at the touchlines to witness a game that they should be playing. They want to do things for themselves and all by themselves.⁵²

There are a number of aspects in these aims that are immediately identifiable as key to the configuration of ideas that Biko would later define as the philosophy of Black Consciousness. First, they are primarily couched in an understanding of the black South African experience of apartheid as one in which the antiblack effects of psychological alienation and political absence are crucial. Biko's summation of SASO's aims to "establish a solid identity," "boost up the morale," and to "to make the non-white students accepted on their own terms" forefronts these ramifications and defines SASO as a necessary psychological and political remedy. That SASO understood physical liberation as only realizable through psychological liberation is further evident in SASO's subsequent resolution that:

⁵² Biko, *I Write* 15.

SASO is a black student organization working for the liberation of blacks first from psychological oppression by themselves through inferiority complex and secondly from the physical oppression accruing out of living in a white racist society.⁵³

The logic of defining liberation from “psychological oppression” as a condition for the liberation of the body from “physical oppression” demonstrates Biko’s fundamental preoccupation with the psychological aspects of oppression, and his belief that such oppression must also be opposed on a primary level mentally, that is, by producing a “consciousness” of the self, enabling the dis-alienation of black South Africans.

In order to understand Biko’s lasting literary import, it is crucial to register the significant degree to which Biko couched this struggle for “consciousness” in the act of writing itself as an “inward-looking process”—not only writing *about* psychological liberation, but modeling writing as a performative act of liberation. This is particularly evident in the essays in which Biko began to explicitly develop the philosophy of Black Consciousness.

While serving as President of SASO Biko began to articulate in essays, letters, and speeches a set concepts that would grow into the philosophy of Black Consciousness, it was not until after his one-year term as President and his transition to the role of SASO’s Chairman of Publications in July of 1970, that both Black Consciousness and its literary implications began to take shape. This development took the form of a series of

⁵³ Biko, qt. in Woods 161.

essays, interviews and speeches that he produced over the next seven years until his assassination in 1977.

A signal moment in this development came in the August 1970 edition of the SASO Newsletter (the first under Biko's editorship), in which Biko, writing under the pseudonym "Frank Talk," published the first of a series of essays under the title "I Write What I like." Dismissing the import of struggle with right-wing white "nationalists"⁵⁴ (professing that "these are not the people we are concerned with"), Biko set out in this first I Write/Frank Talk essay to assert the primacy of black "psychological independence" with a direct attack upon the white liberal establishment:

We are concerned with that curious bunch of nonconformists who explain their participation in negative terms: that bunch of do-gooders that goes under all sorts of names—liberals, leftists etc. These are the people who argue that they are not responsible for white racism and the country's "inhumanity to the black man". These are the people who claim that they too feel the oppression just as acutely as the blacks and therefore should be jointly involved in the black man's struggle for a place under the sun. In short, these are the people who say that they have black souls wrapped up in white skins.

The role of the white liberal in the black man's history in South Africa is a curious one. Very few black organisations were not under white direction.

True to their image, the white liberals always knew what was good for the

⁵⁴ Here, Biko is making reference to the conservative ruling National Party, whose members were widely called, with a level of derision, "nationalists" or "nats."

blacks and told them so. The wonder of it all is that the black people have believed them for so long.⁵⁵

As in his critique of NUSAS, Biko found these “multiracial political organisations and parties and the “nonracial” student organisations, all of which insist on integration not only as an end but also as a means,” fundamentally faulty in their operations because the non-racial “integration they talk about is first of all artificial.” Rather than representing the cooperation of equally valued and empower groups, “the people forming the integrated complex” of liberal organizations and movements “have been extracted from various segregated societies with their inbuilt complexes of superiority and inferiority and these continue to manifest themselves even in the “nonracial” set-up of the integrated complex.” Thus, rather than eradicating racism (racial hierarchy and antiblack values), the “the integration so achieved is a one-way course, with the whites doing all the talking and the blacks the listening [...] It is rather like expecting the slave to work together with the slave-master’s son to remove all the conditions leading to the former’s enslavement.”⁵⁶ Here we find Biko’s analysis of liberalism branching out from a specific attack upon NUSAS to the broader role of liberalism in apartheid society. The liberal model of integration is unviable in Biko’s logic, because it does not fix the root of oppression in South Africa: the black “man’s” silence and alienation. Rather, it is understood by Biko to re-inscribe them. For Biko, the implicit racism within liberal organizations thus evinced non-racialism’s ineptitude in bringing about true oppositional politics against the policies of the right wing apartheid state.

⁵⁵ Biko, *I Write* 20.

⁵⁶ Biko, *I Write* 20-21.

Accordingly, Biko interpreted the formal opposition of liberalism and apartheid as a false dialectic, pointing out the shared assumption of white power that underpinned both positions:

The basic problem in South Africa has been analysed by liberal whites as being apartheid. They argue that in order to oppose it we have to form non-racial groups. Between these two extremes, they claim, lies the land of milk and honey for which we are working. The *thesis*, the *anti-thesis* and the *synthesis* have been mentioned by some great philosophers as the cardinal points around which any social revolution revolves. For the *liberals*, the *thesis* is apartheid, the *anti-thesis* is non-racialism, but the *synthesis* is very feebly defined. They want to tell the blacks that they see integration as the ideal solution [...] The failure of the liberals is the fact that their *antithesis* is already a watered-down version of the truth whose close proximity to the thesis will nullify the purported balance.⁵⁷

As a form of white supremacy, liberalism thus could not possibly engage apartheid structures dialectically because it was in fact part and parcel of the underlying white power structure. Thus retaining liberals as the official opposition of the apartheid state was a fundamentally misguided project, according to Biko, because liberalism simply functioned to mask racism and diffuse antiracist struggle. As he stated in a later essay:

while we progressively lose ourselves in a world of colourlessness and amorphous common humanity, whites are deriving pleasure and security

⁵⁷ Biko, *I Write* 90.

in entrenching white racism and further exploiting the minds and bodies of the unsuspecting black masses. Their agents are ever present among us, telling us that it is immoral to withdraw into a cocoon, that dialogue is the answer to our problem.⁵⁸

Biko and his colleagues in SASO and the nascent Black Consciousness Movement of course saw such “dialogue” as a false platitude, because they had already registered the fact that non-racialism tended to silence black activism rather than empower it. Accordingly, “withdraw[ing] into a cocoon” is exactly what Biko believed was necessary for the realization of black freedom in South Africa. In fact, in his first “I Write What I Like” essay, Biko defined the outlines of a necessary new direction—Black Consciousness—as a withdrawal from white-dominated public life, into a realm of black self-determined politics:

From this it becomes clear that as long as blacks are suffering from inferiority complex—a result of 300 years of deliberate oppression, denigration and derision—they will be useless as co-architects of a normal society where man is nothing else but man for his own sake. Hence what is necessary as a prelude to anything else that may come is a very strong grass-roots build-up of *black consciousness* such that blacks can learn to assert themselves and stake their rightful claim.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Biko, *I Write* 50.

⁵⁹ Biko, *I Write* 21, emphasis added.

Biko thus introduced the concept of Black Consciousness for the first time in his essays as a necessary withdrawal from non-racialism and liberal control, into a process of self-awareness through which black power could be established and racism defeated.

Biko moved away from a critique of liberalism in his second “I Write What I Like” essay in the September 1970 issue of the SASO Newsletter. Here Biko proposed a more detailed definition of Black Consciousness. Biko began this essay by stating: “In the last issue, I took a look at a section of the white community. Today I propose to concern myself with the black world—the validity of the new approach.”⁶⁰ This “new approach” is evidently Black Consciousness, as Biko explains with the following biographical note:

Born shortly before 1948, I have lived all my conscious life in the framework of institutionalized separate development. My friendships, my love, my education, my thinking and ever other facet of my life have been carved and shaped within the context of separate development. In stages during my life I have managed to outgrow some of the things the system taught me. Hopefully what I propose to do now is to take a look at those who participate in opposition to the system—not from a detached point of view but from the point of view of a black man, conscious of the urgent need for an understanding of what is involved in the new approach—“black consciousness”.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Biko, *I Write* 27.

⁶¹ Biko, *I Write* 27.

Biko made a number of key logical assertions in this passage. First, he implicitly struck a difference between those who operate “from a detached point of view” (liberals), and those who are presumably “attached” to the realities of “institutionalized separate development” (segregation/racism), such as himself, “a black man.” Secondly, Biko introduced the issue of “consciousness” into this lived experience of oppression, highlighting that he had “lived all of my consciousness life” in its midst, and had become “conscious of the urgent need” for a new awareness with which to fight against it, which he termed “black consciousness.” Black Consciousness thus arose here as the confluence of the lived experience of racial oppression and a nascent but urgent awareness (“consciousness”) of this lived experience.

Subsequently, Biko built upon earlier assertions about the primacy of the psychological aspects of oppression over the physical, in positing the gravest consequences of apartheid as psycho-spiritual: “Material want is bad enough, but coupled with spiritual poverty it kills. And this latter effect is probably the one that creates mountains of obstacles in the normal course of emancipation of the black people.”⁶² It is thus to an investigation of the psychological aspects of oppression that Biko’s analysis turned:

To a large extent the evil-doers have succeeded in producing at the output end of their machine a kind of black man who is man only in form. That is the extent to which the process of dehumanisation has advanced [...]

⁶² Biko, *I Write* 28.

This *is* the truth, bitter as it may seem, that we have to acknowledge before we can start on any programme designed to change the status quo.⁶³

It was on these terms of a monumental self-determined shift of consciousness that Biko's *I Write/Frank Talk* essays predicate black emancipation, stating explicitly here that, "the only vehicle for change are these people who have lost their personality."⁶⁴ In place of the liberal agenda—what Biko would later term "beggar tactics"⁶⁵—Biko posited that black self-determination could only be developed through a process of critical introspection, the self-determined struggle of Black Consciousness:

The first step therefore is to make the black man come to himself; to pump life back into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity, to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of his birth. This is what we mean by an inward-looking process. This is the definition of "Black Consciousness."⁶⁶

Black Consciousness can thus be understood in Biko's formulation, not as some innate biological essence indexed by darker skin color, but as a *process* of introspection and political struggle engaged in by the oppressed.

Biko accordingly came to define blackness in historical terms as an identity produced by those, "who are by law or tradition politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society and identifying themselves

⁶³ Biko, *I Write* 28-29, emphasis retained.

⁶⁴ Biko, *I Write* 29.

⁶⁵ Biko, "Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity," *I Write* 90-91.

⁶⁶ Biko, *I Write* 29.

as a unit in the struggle towards the realization of their aspiration.”⁶⁷ In this manner, Biko formulated blackness as the politics of those who took up the emancipatory project of transcending their own historical oppression in a racist society. In short, Black Consciousness was a philosophy that redefined blackness as the practice of creating historical agency among the racially oppressed.

As such, Black Consciousness sought literally to create blackness as a politics of emerging from political absence. Lewis Gordon raises this performative dimension of Black Consciousness by highlighting the quandaries informing black resistance to apartheid:

what should one do when the place of discursive opposition has been barred to some people? What should those who live in the city but are structurally outside of it do if they do not accept their place of being insiders who have been pushed outside? Their questions pose the possibility of politics for the sake of establishing political life. It is an activity that is paradoxical. They must do politics in order to establish politics.⁶⁸

In this understanding, blackness has to be enacted in order to be registered as a politics, because, otherwise, it has no “political life,” and is supplanted by the lived experience of abject oppression. In these paradoxical terms, blackness as a politics where no politics

⁶⁷ Ben Langa, qtd. in Mabogo More, “Biko: Africana Existential Philosopher,” 55.

⁶⁸ Lewis Gordon, “A Phenomenology of Biko’s Black Consciousness,” *Biko Lives!: Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko*, eds. Andile Mngxitama, et al. (New York: Palgrave, 2008) 87-88.

otherwise exists, has to be *done*: “Biko understood this. His genius included rendering politics *black*.”⁶⁹

One could also add that Biko fused not only blackness with politics, but also fused politics and blackness with the very act of writing. It is in these terms that Biko’s I Write/Frank Talk essays take on a specific performative signifying value. That is, there is more than an incidental relation between Biko’s definition of Black Consciousness as a struggle for black political presence, and the performative terms of his I Write/Frank Talk essays through which Biko generated his articulation of Black Consciousness. Rather than writing *about* a pre-existing racial consciousness or black selfhood that precedes its performance, his I Write//Frank Talk essays reflexively draw attention to the manners in which these essays are (like latter day, post-apartheid poetic invocations of these tropes) the performative enactment of Black Consciousness. Blackness arises not as “external [...] to the works themselves,” but as performatively generated through the act of writing.⁷⁰

Mark Sanders has accordingly observed that in these essays,

The rubric and name unite thought (“I write”) and desire (“I like”), intellectual practice and intentional autonomy, and are at the same time the performative instantiation of a subject (“I”) in and through language, which exists in freedom (*francus* =free) (“Frank Talk”).⁷¹

⁶⁹ Gordon, “A Phenomenology” 88, emphasis retained.

⁷⁰ Benston 4-5.

⁷¹ Sanders 165.

In this swirl of selfhood and expression, the act of writing and the act of political self-definition, so elemental to Black Consciousness, are merged as one act. The black “I,” in its desires (“I like”) and freedom (frank), is actualized in the act of writing. The “I” exists in the “Write.” Yet, more than “writing back” to whiteness, which assumes on some level the pre-existence of a black self from which one writes, to “write what I like” is thus to actualize an “I” that cannot otherwise be registered (“heard,” “seen”). That is, it is a performative instantiation of self-determined presence, “doing” Black Consciousness “with words.”⁷² It is, to reprise Lewis Gordon’s observation of the performative logic of Black Consciousness, writing black “politics for the sake of establishing political life,”⁷³ in that the author performatively “write[s] *what* I like”—blackness—into existence. The substance of the black self (“I Like”) is actualized in the performative inscription (‘I Write’).⁷⁴

We thus encounter in Biko’s essays more than the outlines of a pre-conceived political philosophy set down on paper, but, rather, the performative effort to write Black Consciousness into presence. In that Biko premises Black Consciousness upon the performative struggle for self-determined black presence, black writing is thus infused with the mandate to function performatively, as emerging from absence.

The subsequent chapters of this dissertation explore the manners in which post-apartheid Biko poems elaborate upon this performative conception of black writing. Through their efforts to leverage these tropes derived from Biko’s writings to speak to

⁷² J.L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP) 1962.

⁷³ Gordon, “A Phenomenology” 88.

⁷⁴ Sanders 165.

contemporary political and aesthetic issues, it becomes apparent that his essays' performative dimensions open up his legacy to ongoing poetic elaboration.

CHAPTER 2: THE STRUGGLE OVER BIKO'S LEGACY

"In the name we discover a struggle"

*Ahmed Veriava and Prishani Naidoo*⁷⁵

"some meet the NEW DREAM with a scream"

*Lesego Rampolokeng*⁷⁶

Steve Biko is a widely circulated icon in post-apartheid South Africa. Like a South African Che Guevara of sorts, Biko's image, name, and key maxims are recycled on t-shirts, screen savers, and advertisements, and are commonly invoked in the rhetoric of political parties seeking to leverage his popular appeal as a revolutionary martyr.⁷⁷ This was impressed upon me recently in August of 2009 while walking in the Newtown district of Johannesburg. In the course of this five minute walk I encountered posters for Lesego Rampolokeng's play *Bantu Ghost: a stream of (black) unconsciousness* at the Market Theatre, vendors selling Biko (and Che Guevara) t-shirts on a sidewalk, and a vehicle painted with advertisements for a hair salon deriving its name from Biko's. As the proximity of these *Bantu Ghost* posters to these various commercial strains of Biko's legacy suggests, Biko poems are produced in relation not only to Biko's own life and

⁷⁵ Ahmed Veriava and Prishani Naidoo, "Remembering Biko for the Here and Now," *Biko Lives!: Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko*, eds. Andile Mngxitama, et al. (New York: Palgrave, 2008) 234.

⁷⁶ Lesego Rampolokeng, "Welcome to the New Consciousness," *Talking Rain* (Johannesburg: COSAW, 1993) 33-34.

⁷⁷ Veriava and Naidoo 234.

writings, but also in relation to the popular and political revaluation of Biko as a logo and sound byte. This relationship often arises within Biko poems quite overtly, as “the labor of the scream,”⁷⁸ the struggle to redeem the transgressive, performative value of Biko’s legacy in the present. In this chapter, I will explore the manners in which this struggle manifests in contemporary Biko poems.

Mphutlane wa Bofelo’s “Conversation with Bob Marley”⁷⁹ is a poem that is centrally animated by this struggle over Biko’s legacy. Dwelling upon the question posed by Bob Marley’s “Redemption Song,”⁸⁰ namely, “How long shall they kill our prophets,” this poem considers the manners in which Biko, like other “prophets” of the anti-apartheid struggle (dead and living), is conspicuously refashioned in post-apartheid South Africa.

“Conversation with Bob Marley” begins by observing Marley’s question in relation to the manners in which corruption has eroded the progressive politics of those former activist leaders who have become greedy for power and money in the post-independence era:

“How long shall they kill our prophets?”

Hello, Bob Marley

Finally your question has an answer

Or shall we say has to be updated

They no longer kill the prophets

⁷⁸ Veriava and Naidoo 235.

⁷⁹ Mphutlane wa Bofelo, “Conversation with Bob Marley,” *The Heart’s Interpreter* (Qualbert, South Africa: Mphutlane wa Bofelo, 2007) 38-39.

⁸⁰ Bob Marley and the Wailers, “Redemption Song,” *Uprising*, Island, 1980.

The wallets do the talking and prophets shut their mouths.

Once we deployed comrade Ram

From labor to the government sector

He re-deployed himself to the corporate sector

By chance I met him at a dinner party

Asked him to clarify the difference

Between retrenchment and rightsizing

“It is not cultured to talk while you are eating”, he said

My simple mind got the message:

How can you talk while the mouth is full?

With these images of “eating” as corruption and greed, Bofelo evokes the stuffing and silencing of the mouths of those prophets that survived apartheid only to betray the rank and file of their resistance movements, “re-deploying” themselves from public service to the corporate world. Thus, they no longer “speak” in resistance to oppression because their mouths are metaphorically filled with their new activity of “eating.”

While “Conversation with Bob Marley” depicts former prophets now preoccupied with gorging themselves, we encounter images of the disruptive politics of dead anti-colonial leaders such as Che Guevara and Steve Biko neutralized, hollowed out, and refashioned as commodities and icons for the materialism and privilege of a new black political and economic elite:

How long shall they kill our prophets?

Hey, Mister Bob Marley

This question begs for an update

Che' is an ornament

Biko is collectors' item

Designer labels bought with pomp and grandiose

Paraded at exclusive clubs

By strange creatures speaking a strange language

At home in New York, terrified in Soweto

Physical citizens of Azania,⁸¹ mental residents of Europe

Re-minted as icons of buying power upon expensive trinkets and t-shirts, figures such as Guevara and Biko find new worth as commodities consumed by highly mobile elites ill at ease in black South Africa ("At home in New York, terrified in Soweto"). The irony is, of course, that these prophets who stood for socialism and, especially in Biko's case, black self-love, are refashioned into icons of the opposite: elite capitalist privilege and the phobia of blackness. "Conversation with Bob Marley" thus casts this commodification and de-politicization of revolutionaries as the new method of "killing prophets," living and dead.

Moreover, this deadly process impinges upon the nation's art and poetry:

They build false monuments

In the name of the prophets

Turn heroes into iconoclast

Now they engineer cloned poets

⁸¹ Azania is a name for South Africa derived from Black Consciousness discourse.

Dreaded caricatures ejaculating sterile verses

Rhyme crazy, content shy morons

Spiting nursery rhymes for poetry

This stanza raises the troubling suggestion that prophets are silenced not only through corruption and post-mortem commodification, but also through art. Ossified in “false monuments” to a consumer culture, and praised by a prominent coterie of “cloned poets” with “sterile verses,” prophets are shown to be politically and aesthetically sterilized, assassinated in terms of Marley’s verse.

Yet, in this moment of poetic crisis Biko arises as an unsettling specter in “Conversation with Bob Marley.” Against the defeatism of the last words of “Redemption Song”—“Some say it’s just the part of it/We have to fulfill the book”—Bofelo observes Biko’s ghost lurking in the wings, amongst the shacks of Alexandra Township, pushing back against the fatality of the de-politicization inferred in Marley’s lyrics:

“Some say it’s just the part of it

We have to fulfill the book”

Hello, Mister Bob Marley

The book of real life is unfolding

Today it is murder by memory

Bureaucrats institutionalize

The legacy of our heroes

To build an empire for themselves

From the marginal zones of shanty Alex

Biko's ghost watches in amazement

As he is re-membered

In a club-members only banquet

In the comfort zone of urban suburbia

This passage is evocative of the range of spectral invocations of Biko within contemporary Biko poems, for Biko's ghost is cast in conflict with his commodified and "re-membered" status in the service of the interests of a post-apartheid national elite who congregate "In a club-members only banquet/In the comfort zone of urban suburbia." Here, Biko's ghost arises haunting from the marginal shack lands of the country, suggesting the possibility of a politics of subaltern struggle in a context otherwise dominated by anti-humanistic values and the evacuation of hope.

Here, Bofelo's use of "Alex" (Alexandra Township), as the site of Biko's spectral entrance is also highly symbolic, for this township sprawls with its notoriously convoluted and cramped quarters directly across the street from Sandton City, one of South Africa's most opulent suburbs. Biko's lurking ghost of emancipatory politics, this poem suggests, exists in the claims of the most marginalized upon the present, claims that multiply in spite of his "re-membrance" as an icon of elite privilege.

This struggle over the meaning of Biko's legacy is further evident in poems by Bofelo such as "Verwoed [sic] is Black: Biko is on Holiday,"⁸² which invokes Biko as a symbol of lost black self-love. With Biko "on Holiday," Bofelo scathingly indicts the

⁸² Mphutlane wa Bofelo, "Verwoed is Black: Biko is on Holiday," *Bluesology & Bofelosophy: Poetry & Essays* (Braamfontein, South Africa: Botsotso, 2008) 25-26.

recent rise of xenophobic violence against “foreign” Africans in South Africa, comparing “negrophobic” South African vigilantes (of color) with the architect of apartheid, the late South African Prime Minister, Hendrick Verwoerd. Poems such as Bandile Gumbi’s “After the Fact”⁸³ (discussed further in Chapter 5), similarly call into question the presumed emancipation of blackness in these “supposedly post times,” in which Biko “lingers” as both an icon of elite privilege and the potentiality of the opposite, an unsettling subversive politics, a “phoenix,” she writes, of “nakedness and truth.” This struggle takes on rural tones in Vonani Bila’s “The Kowtowing Chiefs” (discussed further in Chapter 4), which contrasts the anti-apartheid leadership of figures such as Biko with the greed and corruption of contemporary rural leaders, who, while presumably assuming the mantle of past leaders such as Biko, are described by Bila as “a gluttonous waste/nothing else.”⁸⁴

Biko poems can accordingly be seen to agitate against the political and aesthetic implications of Biko’s contemporary revaluation as a “name made common”⁸⁵ within popular and political discourses antithetical to the premises of Black Consciousness. Construed as “common,” Ahmed Veriava and Prishani Naidoo suggest, Biko becomes politically (and by extension, we may add, aesthetically) conservative, a contradiction to Biko’s articulation of Black Consciousness as a politics of the politically effaced and oppressed. This contradiction, Veriava and Naidoo argue,

⁸³ Bandile Gumbi, “After the Fact,” *Pangs of Initiation* (Somerset West, South Africa: H.A. Hodge, 2004) 2-3.

⁸⁴ Vonani Bila, “The Kowtowing Chiefs,” *Beauty Came Groveling Forward: Selected South African Poetry and Prose*, ed. Gary Cummiskey. 2 December 2009 <[http://www.bigbridge.org/B B14/SA-PVB.HTM](http://www.bigbridge.org/B%20B14/SA-PVB.HTM)>.

⁸⁵ Veriava and Naidoo 234.

mak[es] our task of remembering Biko all the more urgent. For the name, Biko—the marker of a seditious style of life—has been made fashionable. Literally. Take a walk through the Zone in Rosebank and peek through one of the shop windows. You might be surprised to find Biko’s face staring back at you from a T-shirt selling for over R300.⁸⁶ Sit down at one of the posh coffee shops and try to listen in on the conversation at the next table. Try not to act confused if you hear some black economic empowerment (BEE) executive expound on “Corporate Black Consciousness” and the importance of black pride. Biko is “big” in Rosebank. So “big,” in fact, that one can’t help but be reminded of Walter Benjamin’s warning: *“not even the dead will be safe if the enemy wins. And the enemy has not ceased to be victorious.”*⁸⁷

As Veriava and Naidoo’s general summation of the struggle over Biko’s legacy suggests, Biko poems arise not innocuously, but within a contested terrain in which Biko’s broader afterlife is being hashed out. Reading contemporary poetry through Biko’s “name” we thus encounter a productive labor in which Biko as “the marker of a [truly] seditious style of life” seeks to separate itself from Biko as “the name made common.”

Here, it is instructive to attend to the recent assertion by Andile Mngxitama, Amanda Alexander and Nigel Gibson that the struggle over Biko’s legacy is animated on three key fronts.⁸⁸ The first two fronts, these scholars argue, consist of discourses

⁸⁶ Roughly equivalent at the time of this writing to \$45.

⁸⁷ Veriava and Naidoo 234, emphasis retained.

⁸⁸ Mngxitama et al., “Biko Lives” 16-19.

emanating from the closely intertwined new economic and political elites that the novelist Zakes Mda has collectively called “the Aristocrats of the Revolution.”⁸⁹

The first front in which these scholars locate Biko today is thus within the self-justifications of the new black business elite. These elites are commonly associated with the state-driven Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) program, through which the post-apartheid South African government has leveraged a form of affirmative action within the corporate economic sector to cultivate a small yet extravagantly wealthy new black economic elite. Biko, these scholars maintain, is invoked in this arena largely as an icon of black capitalist empowerment, which ultimately masks residual white economic dominance and the continuing economic exclusion of the majority of the population. Drawing on the work of Moeletsi Mbeki,⁹⁰ Mngxitama, Alexander and Gibson thus argue “that BEE was conceived by white business to legitimate itself in the postapartheid era,” and while it has produced a small black economic elite, the program has done little to mend the real racialized disparities in income in the country.⁹¹ Biko is thus detached in this arena from his associations with the economic struggles of the oppressed, and is ushered forth as a symbol of “trickle down” economics antithetical to the systemic transformation of South Africa’s economy.

The second key strain of Biko’s contemporary legacy suggested by Mngxitama, Alexander and Gibson emerges from the realm of “state-linked political and bureaucratic

⁸⁹ Zakes Mda, *The Heart of Redness* (New York: Picador, 2003) 33, 171.

⁹⁰ Moeletsi Mbeki, “Concepts of Transformation and the Social Structure of South Africa,” *Visions of Black Economic Empowerment*, eds. Xolela Mangcu et al. (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2007) 216-225.

⁹¹ Mngxitama et al., “Biko Lives” 16-17.

classes.” Here Biko is mobilized along with terms such as “transformation” and “representativity”⁹² to outwardly signify mass black political enfranchisement while masking the entrenchment of a small black political elite closely intertwined with the new black economic elite. According to Mngxitama, Alexander and Gibson, this re-signification further obscures the fact that South Africa’s governing practices, like its economy, are seen and experienced by many as still structured upon “colonial and apartheid forms” of governance, which “As a bureaucracy [...] confronts the majority of blacks as a cold, arrogant, often violent and indifferent system.”⁹³

Together, the BEE Biko and the Biko of state power evoke a Biko who justifies the entrenchment of elite power and privilege, “a Biko”—Mngxitama, Alexander and Gibson contend—“who is mute in the face of continued black suffering, exclusion, and humiliation.”⁹⁴ Such observations have led Lewis Gordon to argue that, “The structures that now more rigorously subordinate groups of South Africans in poverty (“the poor”) present themselves in ways that at first seem to make Biko’s appeal to a *black* consciousness problematic” in that they are perpetuated by an ostensibly black government. “Nevertheless,” Gordon continues, “the blacks who now represent blackness in the South African government are clearly not based on Biko’s political designation, but the old South African racial designations” in that the blackness of the state, like that of the BEE elite with which the state is entangled, is defined a priori through biology, without regard to Biko’s definition of blackness as the struggle of the politically effaced.

⁹² Mngxitama et al., “Biko Lives” 17.

⁹³ Mngxitama et al., “Biko Lives” 17.

⁹⁴ Mngxitama et al., “Biko Lives” 18.

Gordon thus concludes that these black elites “have taken the reins from the whites and have presented a more rigorous means of disarming the political voice of excluded populations,” ultimately leading to the observation that, “If politics itself is what is at stake in the failure to address blackness,” beyond its associations with conservative elite privilege, “then there is the ironic conclusion that the contemporary South African state is also an antiblack one.”⁹⁵

While Biko circulates through these two entangled (state and BEE) fronts as an icon of elite economic and political power, Mngxitama, Alexander and Gibson also point out (like Gordon, as well as Veriava and Naidoo), that Biko’s legacy emerges from a third front as the struggle for political life by the county’s most disenfranchised. As Gibson has asserted elsewhere, the ideas that inspire movements such as the Durban-based shack-dwellers association Abahlali baseMjondolo, and the Johannesburg-based Landless People’s Movement, both of which have gained international prominence for challenging the lack of equitable land and housing access in the post-apartheid era, are examples of Biko’s symbolic value in the transgressive politics of the otherwise politically absent.⁹⁶

Key to Biko’s continuing relevance to this transgressive strain of black politics is the acute prescience shown within Biko’s writings about the contours of oppression in the post-apartheid era, what David Theo Goldberg has called “racial neoliberalization.”⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Gordon, “A Phenomenology” 91, emphasis retained.

⁹⁶ Nigel Gibson, “Upright and free: Fanon in South Africa, from Biko to the shackdwellers’ movement (Abahlali baseMjondolo),” *Social Identities* 14.6 (November 2008): 683-715.

⁹⁷ Goldberg, *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* passim.

Without a fundamental, systemic revolution, Biko foresaw a nominally transformed post-apartheid South Africa, “in which the poor will grow poorer and the rich richer in a country where the poor have always been black [...] driven to chaos by irresponsible people from Coca-cola and hamburger cultural backgrounds.”⁹⁸ In a post-apartheid South Africa that has made the transition to a neoliberal economy at a dizzying pace, yet with simmering racial tensions and some of the world’s highest disparities in income and standards of living,⁹⁹ these scholars assert that Biko’s philosophy of black struggle for political life remains as pertinent as ever in “the shout of black majority for whom the formal ending of apartheid has not yet altered circumstances in any meaningful way.”¹⁰⁰ Thus, Mngxitama, Alexander and Gibson argue that it is this third front of struggle which is most aligned with Biko’s life and writings: “The legacy carriers of the BC philosophy are the excluded majority who continue to make life under extreme conditions and who, as Frantz Fanon once put it, cannot conceive of life otherwise than in the form of a battle against exploitation.”¹⁰¹

In terms of this dissertation, this analysis and Bofelo’s “Conversation with Bob Marley” are helpful in understanding Biko poems in that they evoke the logic so central

⁹⁸ Biko, *I Write* 91.

⁹⁹ A recent study by the South African Institute for Race Relations suggests that, while the gaps between racialized groups’ incomes have slightly shrunk over the past fifteen years of independence, South Africa remains highly stratified economically, such that, while the per capita income in South Africa in 2008 was R32,599, the per capita income for white South Africans during that period was R135,707, suggesting an almost insurmountable disparity in economic power between racialized groups. “White South Africans Still Top of the Income Pile,” *Mail & Guardian Online* 4 December 2009 < <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2009-11-24-white-south-africans-still-top-of-the-income-pile>>.

¹⁰⁰ Mngxitama et al., “Biko Lives” 18.

¹⁰¹ Mngxitama et al., “Biko Lives” 19.

to the performative understanding of Biko and Black Consciousness. Because blackness can only be realized in the process of struggle for political life from the margins, it cannot be reconciled with elite power or the status quo. It cannot be banked in monuments. Blackness, in Biko's terms, needs to struggle to emerge as the scream of the otherwise politically erased.

This logic explains the pervading sensitivity to (thematic focus upon) the struggle between these three fronts of Biko's legacy in Biko poems, as well as their intense reflexive engagement with poetry as the performative instantiation of this struggle up from oblivion, what Veriava and Naidoo more generally describe as "the labor of the scream, the haunting presence that threatens to rise up against the present."¹⁰² As such, Biko poems are typically marked not only by descriptions of "continued black suffering, exclusion, and humiliation"¹⁰³ and overt rejections of Biko's (BEE) commodification and adoption within the rhetoric of state power, but also indictments of other, usually generalized and unnamed, poets whose poetry serves to evacuate blackness from its transgressive performative associations. These, unoriginal "cloned poets/Dreaded caricatures ejaculating sterile verses," Bofelo's poem reminds us, are "content shy morons," who fail ultimately in their inability to realize the political and aesthetic mandate within Biko's legacy to performatively enact the struggle of blackness for presence.

To poetically invoke Biko in the post-apartheid present, Biko poems suggest, is thus to struggle along these fronts of Biko's afterlife, to seek to actualize a transgressive,

¹⁰² Veriava and Naidoo 235.

¹⁰³ Mngxitama et al., "Biko Lives" 18.

performative poetics from a position of political absence. It is to pursue in contemporary literature the “inward looking process” that Biko called for. This study subsequently unfolds as an inquiry into the manners in which this “labor of the scream” manifests within contemporary South African poetry.

CHAPTER 3: FRANK TALK AND PERFORMANCE

Nowhere is the struggle to redeem the transgressive, performative qualities of Biko's legacy more evident than in those Biko poems that openly elaborate upon Biko's I Write/Frank Talk essays. In this chapter I will explore the manners in which Mphutlane wa Bofelo and Kgafela oa Magogodi have troped upon these essays to elaborate the role of the contemporary South African performance poet. In particular, I will discuss how these poets leverage the performative language of Biko's I Write/Frank Talk essays to posit performance poetry as a struggle for black presence against the absencing powers of antiblack racism and the ossification of blackness and black poetics inherent in symbolically "monumentalizing" Biko. I will thus argue that these Biko poems arise through the productive struggle to performatively open blackness up to continual elaboration in the present.

This struggle is notably raised in Mphutlane wa Bofelo's poem, "I Slam Therefore I Am."¹⁰⁴ In this poem, Bofelo establishes something of a mantra for poets within South Africa's burgeoning slam poetry scene, in which poets converge in community halls, art centers, and night clubs for camaraderie and to dual verbally for prizes and notoriety. Bofelo, one of South Africa's most prominent slam poets, invokes Frank Talk in this poem as symbol of the slam poet's struggle to emerge through performance from the "silence" imposed upon him by society and the literary establishment.

¹⁰⁴ Mphutlane wa Bofelo, "I Slam Therefore I Am," *The Heart's Interpreter* (Qualbert, South Africa: Mphutlane wa Bofelo, 2007) 58-59.

The performative dimensions of this struggle are evident as the poem begins with a play upon the Cartesian understanding of being,

I slam therefore¹⁰⁵

I am therefore

I slam

Upturning the “objectivist” premise of the Cartesian self, which finds selfhood in the act of “taking the mind out of the body”¹⁰⁶ (“I think therefore I am”), “I Slam Therefore I Am” locates selfhood in the “paradoxical”¹⁰⁷ nature of its performative self-declaration. The “I am” of this poem flows from the “slam,” and the “slam” flows from the “I am,” with “therefore” serving to link the performance and the self in circularity. The self and the performance are mutually dependent, produced together.

But more than a general gesture towards the performance of the self, there is a specificity to this performative gesture, in that it is produced against a context of antiblackness. This performative self-declaration thus seeks to conjure the black poetic self out of the absence of antiblack exclusion. This is evident as the poem outlines the reasons for its declaration (“I Slam”):

I slam because when I was soft

You mistook it for timidity

I bang the doors because when

¹⁰⁵ As Ghirmai Negash pointed out to me, “I slam” also suggests Islam, especially given that Bofelo is a Muslim.

¹⁰⁶ Margaret Thompson Drewal, “The State of Research on Performance in Africa,” *African Studies Review* 34.3 (1991): 25.

¹⁰⁷ Gordon, “A Phenomenology” 88.

I knocked you shut them on my face
 [...]

I am because I slam
 Because you cannot hear who I am
 I slam because the person in me you killed
 I slam because the writer in me you will not read
 I slam because the poet you prefer to label
 I am a slam poet because you meet a nightmare in my words
 You meet a nightmare in my words
 Because in your American dream I live a nightmare
 In my words you meet a nightmare
 Because in your rainbow nation dream I live a nightmare

Crucially, the poet's selfhood ("I am a slam poet") is constituted by performance ("because I slam"), in a context of exclusion ("Because you cannot hear who I am"; "you shut [doors] on my face"; "because the person in me you killed"; "because the writer in me you will not read"). Biko's rejection of NUSAS (and liberal organizing in general) rings strongly here, as black self-performance is necessitated by the absencing powers of antiblackness. As Biko observed that SASO was necessary because NUSAS "wouldn't listen to us,"¹⁰⁸ Bofelo's poem suggests that the performance of slam poetry is necessitated by the otherwise pervasive exclusion of the black poet's voice from established literary channels.

¹⁰⁸ Biko, interview with Gail M. Gerhart 22.

But the poem's metaphors further suggest that exclusion is not only a general condition for the poet's performance, but also its source of power. The power of the slam performance to upset the present is understood to derive from its emergence from marginality. Thus, while the speaker's exclusion is illustrated in statements such as, "in your rainbow nation dream I live a nightmare," such exclusion also enables the speaker to disrupt the consciousness of the audience addressed in this poem, as it "meet[s] a nightmare in my words." The slam poet is able to be disruptive because her/his performance arises from absence, interpolating into presence that which presence excludes and upsetting the presence/absence dyad upon which antiblackness is constituted. The "nightmare" of absence becomes a "nightmare" for presence when the slam poet performs black presence.

In deriving power from the act of transcending exclusion through performative self-declaration, "I Slam Therefore I Am" draws on the logic of black performativity dramatized within Biko's *I Write/Frank Talk* essays. As SASO and the BCM were conceived of as deriving their power from their ability to overrun the "dead"¹⁰⁹ discourses of white power, slam poetry is infused with the potential to wreak havoc upon the literary establishment because it enunciates itself from absence.

In this manner, Bofelo continues with images of the slam poet inflicting sudden, "hard" violence upon the audience:

With these fiery words I reciprocate

To slam the book of real life on your face

¹⁰⁹ Biko, interview with Gail M. Gerhart 22.

And smash your paper balls
 With rocket propelled sounds
 [...]

To your deaf ears my frank talk too
 Hard a talk that it slams your ear drums
 I slam because I talk hard
 Because I am frank I slam
 Because I am frank I slam
 Because I am because
 I am frank talk because
 I am the invincible irrepressible voice
 Resonating in the fiery movements of toi-toi dancers

While the slam poet's power derives from the performance of an otherwise absent selfhood—"I am frank talk" who "smash[es] your paper balls/With rocket propelled sounds"¹¹⁰—it also raises the specter of a perpetual struggle for self-actualization. This connotation of incessancy arises both in the strange illogic of the poet's "frank talk" clashing with, even overcoming, "deaf ear drums" (which would seem not to be able to register *any* talk, "frank" or not), and in the "invincible irrepressible voice" of the poet

¹¹⁰ This passage suggests a struggle between writing ("paper balls") and performance ("rocket propelled sounds") otherwise unregistered, even refuted in Bofelo's work. When I asked Bofelo about whether he sees a concrete division between writing and performance in his own poetics, he flatly denied their essential division, even referencing this poem "I Slam Therefore I Am" as evidence of his synthetic understanding of writing and performance. Mphutlane wa Bofelo, interview with T. Spreelin MacDonald, 22 August 2009.

which “resonates” in the steps of the high-knee *toi-toi* protest dance. Images derived from Biko’s essays thus suggest both an inherent power in performing from absence, as well as the perpetuality of such a struggle.

The contours of Biko’s impression upon this struggle within contemporary performance poetry are further developed in the work of Kgafela oa Magogodi. This is apparent on the *Kagablog*, the blog of the South African artist Aryan Kaganof. There, you can find an audio file titled “giant steps featuring—i mic¹¹¹ what i like—kgafela oa magogodi with thabo mashishi (trumpet).”¹¹² As the file name suggests, it is a recording of Magogodi performing his poem “i mike what i like” with Thabo Mashishi on trumpet, covering John Coltrane’s jazz classic “Giant Steps.”¹¹³ In its references to “Giant Steps” and Biko’s well-known maxim “I Write What I Like,” this performance is a convergence of two black Atlantic, one might say Black Consciousness, literary-artistic traditions: what Kimberly Benston has termed “Coltrane poems” of the Black Arts Movement in the

¹¹¹ As is evident in the variable spellings of “mic”/“mike” by Magogodi, Kaganof and others, there is a persisting instability surrounding this term as it is circulated and cited as poem/play/c.d./film/sound file. While I do not wish to suppress this instability, particularly given the potentially different interpretations the word can take on with different spellings, I nonetheless will use the spelling “mike,” as it is the spelling used by Magogodi on most occasions.

¹¹² Kgafela oa Magogodi and Thabo Mashishi, “giant steps,” *Kagablog*, 2 December 2009 <<http://kaganof.com/kagablog/2008/01/12/i-mic-what-i-like-kgafela-oa-magogodi-with-thabo-mashishi-trumpet/>>.

¹¹³ John Coltrane, “Giant Steps,” *Giant Steps*, Atlantic, 1960. While the performance is titled “Giant Steps,” it should be noted that, aside from its title, Mashishi’s improvisational playing is not readily recognizable, at least to my untrained ear, as Coltrane’s “Giant Steps.” The file is posted within a broader discussion of the biographical film about the arts collective, Dashiki, also titled *Giant Steps*, and directed and written by Geoff Mphakati and Aryan Kaganof. Thus, while I leave this strain of intertextuality unexplored in this study, it should be recognized as an added dimension of meaning.

United States (1960s-early 1970s), and what I term here as contemporary South African Biko poems.¹¹⁴

Following Benston's analysis of "Coltrane poems," we can recognize that these two strains of black poetry are more than loosely affiliated in that both simultaneously confront the loss of seminal figures of black expression—John Coltrane and Steve Biko—while struggling to recuperate the creative energies apparently eclipsed with the passing of these figures. In "Coltrane poems," Benston thus asserts,

Coltrane's death registers as a disturbance at the core of modern black culture's claim to performative power sufficient to exceed a history of containment, to transgress the systematic codes that have sought to reduce African-American culture to a vacant sign of futility.¹¹⁵

In these terms, the ability to perform blackness appears to be placed in peril by Coltrane's loss, which, in relation to the pressures of modern racism, registers not only as a death but as an "enforced rupture in the fabric of collective being, a ruin in the tie of growing communal consciousness."¹¹⁶ "Coltrane poems" thus consider the possible (col)lapse of black performativity in the wake of Coltrane's passing. They stare into a vacuum filled

¹¹⁴ This is not to suggest that this blog post is the *first* convergence between the Black Consciousness Movement and the Black Power/Black Arts Movement in the U.S. They have always existed in some degree of mutual awareness. See Biko, Interview with Gail M. Gerhart; and *Giant Steps*. dir. Geoff Mphakati & Aryan Kaganof. African Noise Foundation, 2005.

¹¹⁵ Benston 145.

¹¹⁶ Benston 145.

by the doubts of black art's efficacy in overcoming the "social death"¹¹⁷ of diasporic blackness, an absence indexed by the "vacant sign" of African American culture.

In this sense, "Coltrane poems" raise the central doubt haunting black performativity (or Black Consciousness, broadly construed): namely, whether or not black self-performativity is sufficient to produce black presence in a modern world structured upon what the Africana philosopher Lewis Gordon has termed "antiblack racism," the process whereby the promises and premises of modernity—selfhood, freedom, progress, humanity—are posited through a simultaneous absencing of white Euro-America's racialized others.¹¹⁸ Antiblack racism, Gordon asserts, gives rise to black absence, which in turn substantiates the presence of whiteness: "there is 'something' absent whenever blacks are present. The more *present* a black is, the more absent is this 'something.' And the more absent a black is, the more *present* is this something."¹¹⁹ Or as Frank B. Wilderson III, following Gordon, has observed of the logic of antiblackness: "Blacks, then, void of Presence, cannot embody value, and void of perspectivity, cannot bestow value. Blacks cannot *be*. *Their mode of being becomes the being of the NO.*"¹²⁰ If, as "the being of NO," blackness is structured by antiblack racism as irredeemably inhuman, absent, outside of the realm of potentiality, and cannot "embody value," then

¹¹⁷ Orlando Paterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982) 10. For a discussion of the links between Biko's thought and Paterson's see also Frank B. Wilderson III, "Biko and the Problematic of Presence," *Biko Lives!: Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko*, eds. Andile Mngxitama, et al. (New York: Palgrave, 2008) 104-5.

¹¹⁸ Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith* 1.

¹¹⁹ Gordon, *Bad Faith* 98.

¹²⁰ Wilderson 98, emphasis retained.

the “affective capacities”¹²¹ of blackness to self-perform, to performatively instantiate presence, are inconceivable.

Black presence is precisely what has been sought by many programs of black self-determination, particularly strains of pan-Africanist thought and political action, such as the transnational francophone Negritude movement, the Black Arts Movements in the United States, and South African Black Consciousness, which have ultimately banked upon exceeding this fundamental absence. Yet, the question haunting these programs, as Benston’s analysis of the anxieties of “vacant sign[ification]” underpinning “Coltrane poems” infers, has been whether programs of self-determined black expression can actually realize presence against the gravity of antiblackness.

The most paradigmatic journey into the implications of this question arises in the writings of the Martinican psychiatrist and Algerian Revolutionary, Frantz Fanon, whose *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)¹²² follows a trajectory of this struggle for black presence in an antiblack world. Moreover, it is in these terms that Fanon notably introduced the term “black consciousness” into this broader pan-African discourse, declaring:

black consciousness is immanent in itself. I am not a potentiality of something, I am fully what I am. I do not have to look for the universal. There’s no room for probability inside me. My black consciousness does not claim to be a loss. It *is*. It merges with itself.¹²³

¹²¹ David Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History* (Scottsville, South Africa: U Kwazulu-Natal P, 2005) 194.

¹²² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove P, 2008 [1952]).

¹²³ Fanon, *Black Skin* 114.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of this declaration for the subsequent development of radical black thought, in that Fanon's conception of "black consciousness" provided a succinct concept of self-determined black presence that proved instrumental to the formulation of South African Black Consciousness and the Black Power Movement in the United States, among other strains of black politics.

In Fanon's work we find the fundamentals of Biko's own articulation of blackness: "black consciousness" looks within blackness to substantiate its own humanity, its own presence, and sees consciousness of this black presence as inherently productive of presence. In the politics of self-discovery, the black self is elaborated, not as the "potentiality" of becoming a normative whiteness, as Fanon warns, but as a recognition of its own validity, its own creativity, its own *affectivity*, as a selfhood that is self-determined and unbounded.

Yet, in the extremely slippery analysis that follows this passage in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon appears to fall back from the certainty that "black consciousness" is self-producing of black presence, stating that "not only must the black man be black; but he must be black in relation to the white man."¹²⁴ This "dialectic of negativity" in Wilderson's terms, "offers no imaginable synthesis," since blackness remains not blackness-as-human presence, but a second-order non-whiteness, "in relation to the white man," from which it cannot emerge.¹²⁵ Wilderson thus concludes, following Fanon, that "Blackness cannot attain relationality" with whiteness as a human category because whiteness and modern Western humanness rely in essence upon the non-ness of

¹²⁴ Fanon, qtd. in Wilderson 110.

¹²⁵ Wilderson 111.

blackness. As such, Wilderson maintains with materialist inflections that the term ““Black Human” remains an oxymoron” because,

Black Consciousness can only impact/liberate the Black at the level of preconscious interests and at the level of unconscious identifications; but not at the level of structural positionality. Psychic disalienation is therefore a problematic conception of emancipation in a world where anti-Blackness is a structural necessity and a paradigmatic constant.¹²⁶

This is the abyss of antiblack absence that stares “Coltrane poems” in the face. They confront the passing of Coltrane’s expressive power riddled with questions of whether or not black expression (a cultural presence that overcomes its absence as “a vacant sign of futility”) is realizable beyond Coltrane’s eclipse: “Does black expression, the poets wonder in the face of Coltrane’s loss, meet its vanishing point exactly where it seemed [...] most “brilliant”?” Benston asks.¹²⁷

This anxiety is nearly crippling, and Benston shows that the response of some poems to this quandary does little to recapture Coltrane’s performativity. In particular, by invoking an ossified “Coltrane-as-Name” (like Veriava and Naidoo’s “name made common”), Benston observes that some “Coltrane poems” “monumentalize” Coltrane as an icon of a unified, accomplished black nation (presumably a solid presence).¹²⁸ Poems such as Jayne Cortez’s “How Long Has Trane Been Gone,” Benston argues, evince the

¹²⁶ Wilderson 111.

¹²⁷ Benston 145. Here Benston makes reference to A.B. Spellman’s “Did John’s Music Kill Him?,” *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, ed. Stephen Henderson (New York: William Morrow, 1973) 262.

¹²⁸ Benston 151.

pitfalls of this monumentalization by invoking “a hermeneutics of immanence and singularity,” in which totalizing images of Coltrane and blackness produce the “cancellation of the signifier’s [‘Coltrane’s’] infinite departures,”¹²⁹ and, accordingly, the very productivity of Coltrane’s legacy as one of blackness as an open-ended, transgressive performativity.

In attempts to solidify black presence against the eroding effects of antiblackness, monumentalization thus ironically and contradictorily evacuates performativity from blackness (and Coltrane), and thus also evacuates its transgressive power, transforming the struggle for presence into the struggle for preservation. Settling upon the ossification of figures such as Coltrane as symbols of “the undivided purity of an achieved revolutionary nation”¹³⁰ thus not only fails to restore a Coltrane or black nation sufficient to attain relationality with whiteness, but runs antithetically to the performative dimension of blackness. It denies the essential performativity of blackness as existent only in the struggle from absence, the “labor of the scream” in Veriava and Naidoo’s terms, or “doing politics for the sake of political life” as Gordon would have it.

Benston’s observation that “the self-actualization and collective development seemingly modeled by Coltrane’s music cannot be salvaged after his death if his ‘truth’ is treated as tautology,”¹³¹ thus merges with the third front of struggle over Biko’s legacy, the mandate to constantly and transgressively emerge from absence, to perform blackness as a political coming to life, not as maintenance of an achieved (and illusory, like BEE

¹²⁹ Benston 150.

¹³⁰ Benston 150.

¹³¹ Benston 151.

and state political empowerment in South Africa) black nationhood. This is the front from which Coltrane's and Biko's unfinished expressive energy arises, evincing the struggle to invoke the ever-performative transgressive politics of the dead (Coltrane and Biko), without antithetically entombing them in monuments.

Antiblackness, so productive of anxieties about the efficacy of black expression, can thus be seen to be fused to the performative mandate of blackness. Blackness must be practiced as open-ended, outside of "tautological" assumptions of Biko's concrete "truth" because, as Wilderson observes, "a world without race, more precisely, a world without Blackness [as absence], is truly unimaginable." While this "unimaginable" world of full black presence is the utopian future to which Biko attuned his politics, "Such a world cannot be accomplished with a blueprint of what is to come on the other side," Wilderson argues. The modern world "*must* be undone because, as Biko, Fanon, and others have intimated, it is unethical, but it cannot be refashioned in the mind prior to its undoing."¹³² Recognizing the performative imperative of this poetics, it might be better stated that the "end of the world," as the end of antiblackness, is not so much to be the result of the "undoing" of antiblackness, as it is the performative doing of blackness. In this sense, emancipation cannot be "fashioned in the mind prior to its" doing. It exists in and will result from the performative "labor of the scream."

This is the point through which contemporary, post-apartheid invocations of Biko's I Write/Frank Talk essays become intelligible as performances of a blackness

¹³² Wilderson 102. Mngxitama, Alexander and Gibson similarly assert this performativity in Biko's own thought, stating, "In his refusal to provide a blueprint, Biko and his colleagues foretold a new kind of politics. "The quest for a true humanity" literally means changing the world" ("Biko Lives" 16).

inherently understood to be effaced, obscured, or otherwise non-existent without its performative declaration. Yet, this performative mandate is not without its ambivalence. As it arises in Biko poems, this ambivalence evinces conflicting desires to overcome the erasure of presence inscribed by antiblackness, while eschewing monumentalization by retaining Black Consciousness and Biko as a restless, transgressive spirit.

These implications manifest in the sound file of Magogodi's "i mike what i like" on the *Kagablog*.¹³³ Push play and the poem begins in Magogodi's careful, rolling diction, drawing out the fullness of each syllable:

i mike what i like
 i am not a lick-ass poet
 i give no blowjobs to politicians
 my tongue can't be bought
 to dance in the rot of the king's court
 i don't even rap
 call me the unwrapper
 i unwrap the napkins¹³⁴ of this baby nation
 to show you the slime of the times
 i'm nobody's official poet or puppet
 i mike what i like

¹³³ Kgafela oa Magogodi and Thabo Mashishi, "giant steps," *Kagablog*, 2 December 2009 <<http://kaganof.com/kagablog/2008/01/12/i-mic-what-i-like-kgafela-oa-magogodi-with-thabo-mashishi-trumpet/>>. For transcription purposes, I have consulted the published version (book form) of this poem. Kgafela oa Magogodi, "i mike what i like," *Outspoken* (Johannesburg: Laugh-it-Off, 2004) 1-3.

¹³⁴ diapers

i dis what i dislike
 i carry the spirit of graffiti
 i obey no law of religious gravity
 the spoken word is my shepherd
 i shall not want shit
 however sweet it sounds

Here, Biko's maxim "I Write What I Like" is transfigured into a performance poet's creed in a post-apartheid context characterized by social and political corruption ("slime," "rot") and subservient "lick-ass poet[s]" who relinquish their independence, giving "blowjobs to politicians." The poet not only rejects the "purity" (in Benston's terms) of the nation, but makes it her/his function to expose its corruption, "unwrap[ping] the napkins of this baby nation," a function not only overtly explained, but also enacted by the poet's use of the inverting powers of grotesque images, "us[ing] 'low' language to desacralise what is 'high.'"¹³⁵

This poem continues to signify its transgressive ("graffiti") spirit by linking Biko up with the poetics of the Africana writers such as the late Zimbabwean writer Dambudzo Marechera ("marechera"); Lesego Rampolokeng ("papa ramps"); the African American writer, Black Panther Party member, and death row inmate Mumia Abu-Jamal ("mumia"); and Lefifi Tladi, a prominent South African Black Consciousness poet since the 1970s:

my song grows from the ground

¹³⁵ Flora Veit-Wild, "Carnival and Hybridity in Texts by Dambudzo Marechera and Lesego Rampolokeng," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 23.4 (1997): 563.

where marechera rose to write
in the middle of scream
where papa ramps has
a dream of war
where mumia rhymes
against death row
where we die because
we don't know
how to walk the frank talk
[...]
i soak in the word
of the sage who asked
why swim in the
same soup warmed all over
lefifi tladi
i sample sounds of your soul
for azania's children to hear
the troubled coughs of history's echoes
around us
inside us
in the stink of my ink
when i sound check 1 2 3

i'm free

Frank Talk arises here in opposition to a present defined by the inability of blackness to be performed: “we don’t know/ how to walk the frank talk.” Furthermore, Biko’s poetic struggle as “frank talk” is fused with this broader field of “scream[s]” produced in the works of these Africana writers. The poet’s art “grows from th[is] ground” of “echoes,” elaborating the necessity of performativity to the very conception of blackness. Poetry, as such, becomes the act of “walk[ing] the frank talk,” of writing or “mik[ing] what I like,” engaging in the “labor of the scream” as the poet “sample[s] sounds of” these Africana writers’ “soul[s]/for azania’s children to hear/the troubled coughs of history’s echoes” not in the abstract space of the past, but “around us/inside us.”

In its last lines, the poem slows, and Magogodi’s delivery becomes even more deliberate as these “troubled coughs of history’s echoes” are located “in the stink of my ink/when i sound check 1 2 3/i’m free.” The sound check. The moment in which the poet’s voice first carries through the sound system, is the point in which the performative voice emerges. Mashishi’s trumpet counterpoints each count—1 (honk), 2 (honk), 3 (honk), but does not challenge “i’m free,” which is met with silence. The performance ends, strangely, with a beginning, a sound check. The “i” has been performed, and along with it, the “troubled coughs of history’s echoes” momentarily emerge back into presence. Yet, curiously, all of these voices and echoes drop off into silence with the declaration “i’m free.” There is no blackness to inherently follow blackness, no freedom flowing from freedom. They lapse into silence. The “echoes” of prophetic black performances die away and the ephemeral dimension of black performativity is imposed.

The performance is not durable as a solid presence. The silence following these words in this sound recording accordingly punctuates the very point of Biko's articulation of Black Consciousness: blackness is a politics that exists as a presence only in its performative labor. Thus, "i'm free" is both a moment in which black presence is realized and its limit. Presence and the performance poem are immediately eroded upon the completion of their performance. Freedom can only come again in another performative struggle up from absence.

The implications of these dynamics are further developed in a performance of Magogodi's poem "Freedom is Failing" recorded at the 2009 Berlin Poetry Festival, and subsequently posted on Youtube.¹³⁶ The video begins as Magogodi approaches the microphone against an all-black background. The tight shot frames him throughout from the chest up, his dancing dread locks occupying most of the frame, bouncing with the microphone stand as he punctuates his performance with intermittent jumps and hands waving and clasping his brow.

The poem begins with a mantra in a forceful, melodic cadence, the first and last syllables of each line—"free" and "too"—rendered in a higher register than the rest of each line:

freedom is failing because we raise ugly people too

freedom is failing because we raise ugly people too

¹³⁶ Kgafela oa Magogodi, "Kgafela oa Magogodi," *Youtube.com* 6 December 2009 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9zVwQiZop4>>. This transcription is my own, though I have consulted another transcription given of the poem given on the *Maak's Spirit* website. *Maak's Spirit*. 7 March 2010 <<http://maaksspirit.be/projects/stroke-feat-samanta7-kgafela-oa-magogodi>>.

freedom is failing because we raise ugly people too

freedom is failing because we raise ugly people too

The poem unfolds from this opening mantra with a question about Biko's legacy, beginning with a sharply intoned call of Biko's name, "BIIiko." This blast of Biko's name is followed by a litany of questions about the post-apartheid moment and its effacement of positive black self-image ("we raise ugly people too"), but also of black poetry:

biko said that we blacks are cute but where was bantu going to?

why is it that us whose mother tongue is riot are not spoken to?

who will feed babies whose first language is spoken word?

from the gut of the ghetto one word calls another and that's the spirit
moving but where is the song going to?

is it going to rub ambi lotion¹³⁷ on the skin and burn it 'cause whiter than
snow it longs to be no more a bantu?

will it live in gated rainbows 'cause Soweto is full of *batho ba bantso ba*
rasa it wants to eat *ka setu*?¹³⁸

These questions invoke an anxiety about the mutation of Biko's legacy and black poetics in the post-apartheid era. The undetermined trajectory reveals the risk of lapsing into non-whiteness (internalized antiblackness) and socio-political absence. The term "bantu" serves this ambivalent function here as it indexes Stephen *Bantu* Biko, as well as the

¹³⁷ Skin lotion for women of color, associated here with skin lightening.

¹³⁸ "Soweto is full of noisy black people, it [greed/corruption] wants to eat in silence."

general, derogatory apartheid term for blacks, “Bantu.” “[W]here was bantu going to?” Magogodi asks; towards blackness as Black Consciousness, self-determination, black-is-beautiful “cuteness,” or towards “bantu” as a non-white negative state of being? The mantra preceding it, “Freedom is failing because we raise ugly people too,” as well as the images in this passage leave little doubt that the trajectory is towards “bantu” as a state of non-being, an absence of socio-cultural exclusion and antiblack self-loathing.

This threat of non-being is met not with black self-determination, but with attempts to mutate into white skin—through skin creams—and assume white privilege by fleeing townships (Soweto) full of “noisy black people,” for secluded suburbs (“gated rainbows”) where non-whites can “eat” (engage in corruption) in silence. Thus, “we raise ugly people too,” is an indictment of latter day non-white “complicity”¹³⁹ in its own negative being. The oppressed can subscribe to and reproduce their own oppression as active performers of antiblackness, the poem suggests, as Biko castigated South Africans of “complicity” in their own abject suffering.

This anxiety over the trajectory of “bantu”/Biko’s legacy thus dislodges Biko and black poetics from any presupposed inherent efficacy in the present. The question “Where was bantu going to?” accordingly undermines the teleological certainties underpinning the triumphant congratulatory proclamations of South Africa as a “rainbow nation” with which the post-apartheid era was ushered into being in 1994. There are no certainties here, and “bantu,” like Biko and blackness, has no predetermined or

¹³⁹ See Sanders’ *Complicities* for a thorough discussion of the logic of complicity as it comes to bear upon Biko’s definition of blackness.

tautological truth.¹⁴⁰

Moreover, in this context, black expression is drowned out and absented. The spoken word of the margins is not “spoken to.” Unable to be “heard,” the poem infers that blackness must be continually performed in the face of such erosion into non-white absence. Thus, in the closing lines Magogodi poses the poem’s mantra against teleologies and antiblackness that efface this struggle:

this line is a history test
 freedom is failing because we raise ugly people too
 freedom is failing because we raise ugly people too
 freedom is failing because we raise ugly people too
 freedom is failing because we raise ugly people too
 maybe being blind is the light we want we ask to be deaf too
 maybe being blind is the light we want we ask to be deaf too
 freedom is failing because we raise ugly people too
 freedom is failing because we raise ugly people too
 freedom is failing because we raise ugly people too
 freedom is failing because we raise ugly people too
 please! answer true or false or scream! if you want to

“[T]his line is a history test” because it challenges the constitution of present understandings of blackness, poking holes in its apparently solidity, interpolating into history blackness as processual and performative, and raising the specter of non-white

¹⁴⁰ Benston 151.

complicity in antiblackness. The haunting metaphors of the self-imposed impotence of black expression—willfully not seeing (“blind”) or hearing (“deaf”)—are folded back onto the “bantú” community, as these are markers of its complicity in its own non-ness, in its own cultural and political absence: “we raise ugly people too.”

If we consider freedom here as Biko defined it, as “the ability to define oneself,”¹⁴¹ then “freedom is failing” because of the inability of post-apartheid South Africa to exceed “ugliness,” to “walk the frank talk,” as Magogodi puts it in “i mike what i like.” Locked in a non-white “bantú” positionality infused with antiblack values, “freedom is failing” because of the failure to performatively struggle for black presence.

Magogodi’s own self-assessments appear pervaded by this anxiety and the mandate to forge an ongoing struggle for positive black presence in his own poetry:

Much of my work is about looking at contemporaries in South Africa and what I think doesn’t work. [My work] also celebrates myself and the people around me. Somebody asked me why I can’t balance out things. I seem to be too harsh on the government. If I have five minutes to say something, why should I waste that five minutes on defending the government? I’m not crazy. I had a very interesting conversation with a writer who said, “I like your spirit. You shouldn’t let these guys sleep.” I asked him what he meant. He said based on his experience, dictatorship starts in a very seductive way. It starts out with small things, and once it gets comfortable, you wake up, and you find yourself in serious trouble.

¹⁴¹ Biko, *I Write* 92.

My sense is that, based on his advice, I think the time to scream is now—the time to holler is now when things seem OK—so that we don’t fall into patterns that we hated before or fall into traps that we had before. The problem with these orgies of celebration—nobody hears the scream.¹⁴²

As such, the mantra of “Freedom is Failing” is stacked up line after line as if seeking to summon its own response to its call. Animated by the urgent awareness that “the time to scream is now,” yet infused with an anxiety that within the “orgies” of the present “nobody hears the scream” Magogodi is unleashing, the poem stacks its own mantra up as if struggling to hear its own scream. Seeking to fill the auditorium beyond the frame of the video with his own chorus, Magogodi repeats this mantra on end until almost shrill and breathless his own scream:

freedom is failing because we raise ugly people too
 freedom is failing because we raise ugly people too
 freedom is failing because we raise ugly people too
 freedom is failing because we raise ugly people too
 please! answer true or false or scream! if you want to

Unable to conjure its own chorus, its own echo, this final line first pleads “please!” and urges us to “scream!” before dropping somewhere between glibness and resignation. Both the tone and pace of Magogodi’s performance sink from the stridency of the preceding mantra and this “please!” and “scream!,” ending in the slack entreaty: “if you want to.” From the interface of the *Youtube* page, Magogodi’s final pleas remain

¹⁴² Kgafela oa Magogodi, Interview with Audrey Thomas McCluskey, *The Devil You Dance With: Film Culture in the New South Africa* (Urbana, IL: U Illinois P, 2009) 100.

unanswered as the clip and the performance end abruptly, replaced by scrolling links to related performances. Perhaps therein lies a confirmation that Magogodi's scream is not defeated in its attempt to rally a black performative presence in the face of the "ugly" appropriation of Biko and blackness in the post-apartheid context and beyond. Perhaps the option to replay this poem, or branch out into related clips is a confirmation of Magogodi's observation that "from the gut of the ghetto one word calls another and that's the spirit moving," but, of course, it does not resolve the struggle over Biko's legacy inscribed in Magogodi's appended question, "where is the song going to?" It simply, and necessarily, calls only for another performance of blackness, "if you want to."

Ultimately, Magogodi's performance poems, refracted through layers of media, dramatize the struggle over Biko's legacy in the poetic present. Like Bofelo's "I Slam Therefore I Am," Magogodi's "i mike what i like" and "Freedom is Fading" reflexively interpolate Biko's symbolic performativity into a contemporary context in which both poetry and society are seen to be infused with antiblackness. These poems suggest that antiblackness resides in the post-apartheid context both in this society's unwillingness to "hear" or "speak to" these poems and blackness as emergent, unsettled phenomena, as well as in the form of an internalized negative state of being (non-whiteness) crystallized in Magogodi's observation that "we raise ugly people too."

Furthermore, while Magogodi's and Bofelo's poems suggest that the performance of black poetry is enacted against the eroding powers of antiblackness on these registers, they also eschew the tendency to counter the social absence produced by antiblackness with Biko's monumentalization. Rather, they indict "lick-ass poets" and the

contemporary literary establishment's exclusiveness, who ossify Biko's legacy in the service of the conservation of a new national economic and political elite. Their poems accordingly evince the struggle to retain the open-ended associations of Biko's legacy that enable them to reflexively posit their own tropes upon Biko's legacy as unfolding in the transgressive, performative legacy of Black Consciousness.

Ultimately, the performative language of Biko's I Write/Frank Talk essays enables his transformation into an instrumental symbol within contemporary black performance poetry. These poems invoke Biko, "bantu," and tropes of his I Write/Frank Talk essays to connote the "labor of the scream," whereby Biko underwrites the constant struggle to emerge from absence.

CHAPTER 4: MARGINALITY AND THE RURAL POETICS OF VONANI BILA

“Well, the contours of being a rural poet...one is that you are on the margins”

*Vonani Bila*¹⁴³

“Being an historically, politically, socially and economically disinherited and dispossessed group, they have the strongest foundation from which to operate”

*Steve Biko*¹⁴⁴

In this chapter I will examine the manners in which Steve Biko’s understanding of blackness as a struggle to transcend socio-political absence underwrites Vonani Bila’s rural poetry. I will first explore the ways in which Bila’s poetry conceives of ruralness as a form of absence or marginality. Engaging poems such as Bila’s “Jeannette, My Sister” and “The Child Was Born in Winter,” as well as Bila’s own statements about poetry, we thus encounter the rural in similar terms as the abject existence of “non-white” absence that Biko reacted against in positing Black Consciousness. Secondly, examining poems such as Bila’s “The Kowtowing Chiefs” and “Silence,” I will draw out the manners in which Bila leverages Biko’s performative associations to construct rural poetry as the open-ended labor of emerging from the rural margins. Yet, I will also show that this imperative to struggle in a self-determined fashion from absence impresses upon Bila’s poetry a strong rejection of what he perceives of as the crass materialism and aesthetic

¹⁴³ Unless otherwise indicated, all biographical information and quotations of Bila’s in this chapter derive from an interview I conducted with him in Shirley village, 14-15 August, 2009.

¹⁴⁴ Biko, *I Write* 68.

conservatism of other popular poets who monumentalize Biko and Black Consciousness. Bila thus leverages the performative mandate of Biko's articulation of Black Consciousness to construct the role of the rural poet as fundamentally emergent and self-determined, un-beholden to pre-determined aesthetic or ideological mandates, including monumentalized versions of Biko's own legacy.

Allow me to begin this discussion with a personal story that suggests the issue of absence as it arises under the sign of the rural in Bila's poetry. In August of 2009, I hitchhiked with Vonani Bila from the city of Polokwane to his home village, Shirley Village, in the far northern corner of South Africa. As we stood in the late winter sun that first afternoon outside the home of his mother, Fokisa N'wa-Mahatlani Maxele, I was mesmerized by the relative tropical serenity of Shirley Village. Having spent the majority of my time in South Africa in the dusty, cramped ghettos of Moletjie, and having most recently made my way up to the northern reaches of the country from the infamous Hillbrow neighborhood of inner city Johannesburg, Shirley Village's lone meandering red dirt road and its loose configuration of colorful homesteads seemed to present a different, more idyllic landscape than any I had known in my several years moving in and out of the country.

My pastoral musings were abruptly disrupted though by one of Bila's observations. Indicating two flat stones near where I stood in a narrow patch of dirt between his mother's front stoop and the brick walls of his own unfinished house, Bila noted that these two stones marked the grave of his youngest sibling, Jeanette. "I wrote a

poem about her,” he said.¹⁴⁵ I hastily shifted away from the stones, taking Bila’s comment as a friendly warning not to tread on his sister’s grave. But more than slight embarrassment at my near transgression, I was unsettled by the sudden awareness that I was standing in the middle of the imaginative terrain of Bila’s poetry, one marked by images of rural hunger, violence, and loss. My idyllic moment staring at the thick forest in the valley behind his mother’s home was deflated, and those stones began to well up in my consciousness.

I laid awake that night in his mother’s guest room, with its two aging beds, a battered wardrobe, and yellowing drawings on the walls from children long grown and gone from the home. In my sleeplessness I ruminated on Bila’s poetic preoccupation with witnessing rural lives spirited away by the inhuman conditions of village life. And with the lines of Bila’s poem, “Jeanette, My sister,” spinning through my head, I felt the disruptive force of Bila’s poetry upon the romantic conceptions through which the rural tends to be received:

Jeanette, my sister was born

By the tiny roadside at Shirley village

Way back in 1981

Jeanette, my sister

Died on her mother’s back

Her mother was on the long road to Mashamba

¹⁴⁵ Bila, “Jeanette, My Sister,” *Handsome Jita: Selected Works* (Scottsville, SA: U KwaZulu-Natal P, 2007) 8.

There are spiritual people
 Healers who treat *rigoni*¹⁴⁶
 Healing for free
 Way back in 1981

Jeanette, my sister
 I scroll my memory for your image
 My eyes are clouded and sinking
 In the sea of memory
 But I know you lived
 I did not see you walk
 But you lived
 My last sister
 You died on your mother's back
 Buried under the stoep¹⁴⁷ of our mother's house
 Way back in 1981

This poem is motivated by an imperative to witness Jeanette against the “clouded and sinking” nature of the speaker’s memory of her “Way back in 1981.” The effort to attain this witnessing can be recognized at the outset of its first three stanzas, which begin with the statement, “Jeanette, my sister.” Calling out Jeanette’s name, this refrain both

¹⁴⁶ As Bila explains in the glossary to *Handsome Jita*, “*rigoni*” is “*xiTsonga* for a female illness that threatens the life of a breast-fed baby if the mother is not urgently treated” (113).

¹⁴⁷ “Stoop” in Afrikaans.

attempts to recognize and address Jeanette across the eroding pressures of time, to name and connect with her fading figure in the speaker's memory. This labor to resurrect and interact with Jeanette is further enacted in a statement of filiation ("my sister") between the speaker and the long-removed Jeanette, thereby seeking to affirm a persisting bond between them that resists her "sinking" into absence.

Yet, this refrain—"Jeanette, my sister"—is not entirely sufficient in summoning Jeanette back to presence, and the poem unfolds as the struggle to satiate its need to reclaim Jeanette from absence. The difficulty of this reclaiming is evident in the poem's inability to resurrect a clear image of Jeanette. Thus, while the poem is largely comprised of anecdotal information about the circumstances of Jeanette's death—she died on her mother's back while walking to Mashamba, there were healers there who treated *rigoni* for free, she was buried under her mother's *stoep*, etc.—there is, in fact, very little detail about Jeanette, herself, to satisfy the poem's yearning to resurrect her un-"clouded" self. There is truly only the refrain, "Jeanette, my sister," which establishes her name and filiation with the speaker, and the confessional observation in the final stanza that "I did not see you walk/But you lived/My last sister," to substantiate Jeanette.

Even this statement is tinged with doubt in its confession that "I did not see you walk." Against this confession Bila's declaration, "But you lived," stands a determined, yet incomplete reclamation, in that it offers no visible ("I did not see you") register of her presence. Like Magogodi's attempt to self-echo in the mantra of his "Freedom is Fading," Bila's declaration, "But you lived," struggles against the eroding gravity of time and, systemically speaking, antiblackness, which absents black (and here, black rural)

presence. Ultimately, this deeply personal poem considers the effects of this absenting upon filial bonds, as “Jeanette, My Sister” struggles scrape together few and fleeting images to overcome the tremendous, violent erosion of Jeanette’s presence, and to realize the affective capacity of poetry to overcome the absenting gravity of rural death.

This effort is markedly incomplete, as Jeannette is reclaimed largely in shadows and inferences, which, like the two flat stones marking her grave, serve as limited, yet emotive signs of her life and death. Certainly not a monument—in the sense in which we understand monumentalization as an imposition of a limited, stagnant, orthodoxy of memory—as much as touchstones for the ongoing performative effort to witness erased lives. In conjunction with Bila’s overarching concern with silenced rural stories in his poetry, “Jeanette, My Sister” can accordingly be understood to evince the living spirit of Biko’s legacy, a performative effort to emerge that Veriava and Naidoo have termed the “labor of the scream.” As in Magogodi’s unresolved struggle against “fading” freedom through a “scream,” the incompleteness of Bila’s struggle to summon up from absence lives crushed by the systemic violence of rural life in many ways appears fundamental to the performative understanding of poetics that runs throughout Bila’s oeuvre.

As my encounter with Jeanette’s grave and my all-night vigil in his mother’s guest room with the words of “Jeanette, My Sister” spinning through my head demonstrate, the struggle against marginality in Bila’s poetry is also a struggle to rupture the obfuscating cloud of pastoral pre-conceptions through which the rural—especially rural Africa, in all its associations with the traditional and even primeval—is commonly

received. That this effort is close to Bila's self-conception as a poet is evident in his own declarations, such as when he stated to me that,

a lot of stuff that comes from a rural poet cannot just be about sanitizing the tranquility of a village. The birds that chirp on trees, and the cows that graze lazily and gracefully along the valleys, and so on. There will be part of that, because the landscape, the rural itself, is supposed to be beautiful. But it can be an imaginative creation that, well, rural communities are so peaceful, and all that. But what makes a rural village peaceful when people are unemployed? When people are hungry? When people are jobless? When they have to walk distances to get their education? When they've got to carry dripping buckets from poisoned wells?

Like Magogodi's questioning of freedom, Bila's stinging questions disrupt the latent assumption that peace is a constitutive element of rural life. Indeed, from his beginnings as a child writing poetry in Shirley Village, Bila's most consistent preoccupation has been the poetic struggle to break the silence surrounding the systemic violence of everyday life in rural South African villages. As Bila has maintained:

[W]hen I started I don't think I was really aware of what I was doing. I was just observing life, saying, 'Look. I see people drawing water from mountains, and wells, and all sorts of places, and that kind of water is not healthy. And someone must say something about it, whoever listens. It's dangerous.' But it was not a health awareness campaign. No. I was saying, 'Look, let us speak up. Let us speak out. And if we've got to confront any

source of power, let it be so. Let us do so.' I do that as a patriot. I have nowhere to go [...] I do that because I live some of these conditions.¹⁴⁸

As in "Jeanette, My Sister," this mandate to break silences often unfolds in Bila's poetry as a frustrated struggle to witness. This frustration is often compounded by the traumatic proportions of violence and suffering evoked in poems such as Bila's "The Child was Born in Winter,"¹⁴⁹ which examines an act of infanticide by a rural mother.

The poem begins:

The child was born in winter
 Her mother, so stone hearted
 Wrapped yena¹⁵⁰ in a plastic
 And squeezed, squeezed
 Just like this
 She wanted to drop yena into a pit toilet
 Of green flies & human excrement
 A dog barked
 How?

Rural hospital too far?

Posing this explanation as a question ("Rural hospital too far?"), Bila unsettles any simple absolution of this act of brutality. That is, he calls into doubt the adequacy of

¹⁴⁸ Interview with T. Spreelin MacDonald 2 July 2007.

¹⁴⁹ Vonani Bila, "The Child was Born in Winter," *Handsome Jita: Selected Works* (Scottsville, SA: U KwaZulu-Natal P, 2007) 1.

¹⁵⁰ A pronoun in Sepedi referring to a person.

explaining rural violence as simply derivative of a lack of infrastructure. Instead, he proceeds to draw out in terrifying images the cruelty of the murder, images that indict the mother's inhumanity, yet also are difficult to reconcile, due to their traumatic implications:

Birds mourned the death of a child
Not even hunters could catch this devious woman
She needed no help in delivering the baby
Brave wicked woman
So early in the morning
The sun was shining
She came home victoriously
Unashamed
Mission accomplished
No one saw her bulging tummy
I only saw blood dripping from her legs
As she prepared food in the kitchen
A dog barked
It carried a wrapped plastic bag
In the mouth
How?

My hair rose

My spine shivered

This morning.

The poem ends with this confessional reaction to the ambiguity, inhumanity, anger, and suffering of the event, as registered by a witness. This rural witness speaks from the confusion of trauma, seeking to recount, to order, through broken and shocking images: a plastic bag with a dead human baby presumably wrapped inside, dragged somehow from a toilet's pit by a barking dog; and a woman with blood on her legs whom no one had noticed was pregnant, cooking in the kitchen, killing one domestic duty (child rearing) only to take up another (food preparation). It is a moment of searing disjuncture, of disorder, of irreconcilable images, an allegory for the poet's struggle to fashion presence from absence in the face of the sucking, disordering gravity of the rural ghetto. In the end, the poem's attempt to register the birth of a child with its opening observation, "The child was born in winter," is overcome by the disjuncting trauma experienced by the witness. Whatever presence the baby could have attained on the page is effaced by the witnesses' inability to order these images.

Bila's preoccupation with witnessing the death of a child in "The Child was Born in Winter" is similar to that within "Jeanette, My Sister." In both cases, these babies are quickly erased by the violence of rural life, with Jeanette unable to receive adequate post-natal health care and the unnamed child of "The Child was Born in Winter" quickly suffocated and discarded by her own mother. Ultimately, both poems evoke the tenuous and fleeting nature of rural existence through the struggle of babies to assume presence in

the world, and constructing the labor of the poet as one of attempting to reclaim such lives against the gravity of rural silence.

Such struggles to witness human lives against rural death arise throughout Bila's oeuvre in poems such as "The Disabled Man," "He Left Her Dead," and "Crimes of the Vararas."¹⁵¹ In all cases, images of brutality and suffering are faced with a sense of outrage by the poet-speaker who labors against the silences imposed by them. Indeed, Bila has argued that much of contemporary rural South African poetry springs from a general well of anger at the depravity of rural life, stating: "with the worsening of conditions, generally, in the country, you find a lot of anger in rural poetry, because it's just in the periphery of everything else." Here, the instrumentality of the link between degradation and being on "the periphery of everything else" as fundamental features of the rural, are unavoidable. Furthermore, this marginality is seen to motivate the work of the rural poet, which is constructed upon the effort to work from such peripheral conditions. This sense of marginality thus impresses upon Bila's poetry anger, even a degree of constant indignation, and evokes a performative logic of poetics, in which the rural poet must constantly struggle to break through the silence and obfuscation imposed by rural suffering.

Speaking of this intense motivation that has run throughout his career as a rural poet, Bila relates that, in the beginning,

rurality gave me more impetus to be more convinced that apartheid

destruction was barbaric and more evident in rural communities [...] I

¹⁵¹ Vonani Bila, "The Disabled Man," "He Left Her Dead," "Crimes of the Vararas," *Handsome Jita: Selected Works* (Scottsville, SA: U KwaZulu-Natal P, 2007) 12; 11; 79.

could see that there are villages that are so barren. People are cramped like sardines. And there's just no breathing space. And yet these people are so silent. What's happened? Why are these people so silent when they are basically driven away to suffer endlessly? And for me, that has always been my concern. And I said, these are the things that one needs to raise in poetry.

It is in this question of silence and rebellion against it that Biko's latent influence becomes most apparent in Bila's poetry. Nowhere is this more evident than in his poem "Silence,"¹⁵² in which Biko's framing of blackness as a broader struggle of the most oppressed to emerge from absence arises. The first stanzas of this poem evoke the question of absence in terms of the silence surrounding the grinding systemic violence of slum life:

it's the choking silence
of the disgruntled shack dweller that mutilates my spirit
he who votes for perpetual unemployment
year after year
hope manacled

it's the deafening silence
of men & women waiting for miracles to happen
that leaves my spine cold

¹⁵² Vonani Bila, "Silence," *Handsome Jita: Selected Poems* (Scottsville, South Africa: U KwaZulu-Natal P, 2007) 84.

always wondering

what will happen when mandela goes

it's the suffocating silence

of watching our land devoured by capitalist dragons

that weakens my bones

while we remain loyal toilet cleaners, fishermen,

street sweepers, garbage collectors & farm workers

Against this “choking,” “deafening,” “suffocating” silence, Bila invokes a call for the uprising of blackness, in the expansive Black Consciousness understanding of blackness as constituted not by dark skin, but by a politics of struggle against oppression by the oppressed, themselves. He writes:

this silence we must crack with a whip so strong

in the night so still in broad daylight

across oceans over mountains

in the streets of elim, jozi, porto alegre

thekwini, Mumbai, genoa,

seattle, cancun & everywhere

side by side

[...]

black & strong

we the women of peace we the greens

we the reds we the peasants

we the workers we the first people the first people

like gushing & clapping waves we sing in unison

another world is possible

Grouping “reds,” “peasants,” first people,” “women of peace,” “greens,” and other identities forged in struggle under the category of “black” (“& strong”), Bila invokes one of the most identifiable imprints that Biko made upon racial discourse, the definition of blackness not as a biological essence, but as an identity performed by the oppressed through the struggle to forge oppositional politics. Amidst Marxist slogans and imagery (“another world is possible,” “reds,” etc), Bila’s understanding of the links between subaltern struggles as collectively black bears the unmistakable impression of Biko’s articulation of Black Consciousness.

Biko also arises among images of other anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggle leaders, past and present, in Bila’s recent attack upon rural leadership in his poem “Kowtowing Chiefs”:¹⁵³

our kowtowing, mischievous chiefs are really starving

can't allow bread & butter to pass away from their mouths

they live in under the shades of table mountains

& ecstatically take an excursion to robben island¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Vonani Bila, “The Kowtowing Chiefs,” *Beauty Came Groveling Forward: Selected South African Poetry and Prose*, ed. Gary Cummiskey. 2 December 2009 <<http://www.bigbridge.org/B B14/SA-PVB.HTM>>.

but their subjects can't bear the load of rural poverty anymore
 & prisons are crammed with hungry people
 the real thugs preach the word of god
 to clear conscience & guilt
 neither did they testify sins of apartheid before tutu¹⁵⁵
 our chiefs
 (not sekhukhune, hintsa, makhado, nghungunyani
 or tiro, biko, hani nor phama)¹⁵⁶
 our chiefs in crowns & gowns
 are a gluttonous waste
 nothing else.

As in many of his other poems, Bila characterizes rural life in “The Kowtowing Chiefs” as constituted by the abandonment of rural people by even their traditional leaders. When asked about this anger, and the contrast he creates in this poem between contemporary rural chiefs and revolutionary figures such as Biko and Chris Hani, Bila responded:

the values that Biko stood for, and the vices that the current kind of chiefs
 we have promote, these are very opposed, very different. Biko, Hani stood
 for a strong community dynamic, vibrant community where people are

¹⁵⁴ Table Mountain and Robben Island are landmarks around Cape Town. Robben Island held the prison in which many political prisoners were jailed during apartheid. Today it is a museum, and a popular tourist destination along with Table Mountain.

¹⁵⁵ Archbishop Desmond Tutu was the head of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

¹⁵⁶ African anti-colonial leaders from the 19th and 20th centuries.

active participants in decision making. You know, where community ideas are respected. But the kind of chiefs we have today, they are all what I am trying to describe in that poem, all driven by the need to satisfy their greed. Nothing else. So, Biko was not a greedy person. And I strongly believe that if you are going to build strong communities you don't need greedy people. And because of that, I think he will remain forever relevant in communities as a model for good leadership because he worked with the people. When they set up the projects he was there, not only as the intellectual guide, but also as someone prepared to learn from the people, and articulate the views of the people in his papers.

What makes Bila's discourse on Biko here and other places so instrumental to the study of his poetics is not so much the manner in which Bila sets Biko up as an almost technocratic "model for good leadership," but the way in which he couches the role of the rural poet in similar terms as Biko's role as a revolutionary leader. That is, the powers of Biko's critical consciousness and those of the rural poet are not only equated, but fused in Bila's logic. The powers of both emanate from relationships with marginality, and their role is defined by the act of "articulating" from this marginal position in their writings.

This confluence between poetics and politics is further evident when Bila defines the power of rural poetry as arising out of this marginality:

I think a rural poet today could be the most feared in South Africa, because the rural poet cannot avoid the deep-seated challenges that the rural people are faced with. So, the rural poet, I think, becomes that kind

of voice of reason to articulate the desires of rural people. And I think he does that with love, because he cannot be separated from the rural realities.

Here Bila invokes the instrumentality of being marginal to the very power of rural poetry, the same terms in which he understands Biko's power. The circularity of the conditions and power of rural marginality here correspond with the power of the "nightmare in my words" evoked in Mphutlane wa Bofelo's "I Slam Therefore I Am," discussed in Chapter Three. In the same way that "liv[ing] a nightmare" allows Bofelo to impose a "nightmare" upon the "American dreams"/"rainbow nation" privilege of elite South Africans, Bila transforms Biko's logic of marginality as a necessary condition for self-determination into the terms in which rural poetry is understood to arise with a powerful affective capacity. Rural poetry is seen as deriving from this peripheral experience, from which, like Biko, the poet is able to "articulate" a certain disruptive consciousness.

Bila similarly invokes this perspective of marginality in one of his most well-known poems, "Dahl Street, Pietersburg,"¹⁵⁷ in which he addresses "Cellphone gods," his country's materialistic elites, beckoning them into the filth of ghetto life encountered by the poem's poet speaker:

Cellphone gods
Come wine with me
This running urine in Dahl Street
Come dine with me

¹⁵⁷ Vonani Bila, "Dahl Street Pietersburg," *In the Name of Amandla* (Elim, South Africa: Timbila, 2005) 68.

This hard shit in the ghetto

Here is a poetics thus defined as grown from the gutter “wine” of urine and dinner of “hard shit.” It is a poetics that can only understand itself as springing from some forgotten, neglected, even desecrated space, a poetics that gains its address by its exclusion, and by struggling to articulate a presence from this space of absence.

Yet, this performative effort to arise from absence also impresses upon Bila’s poetics a strong agitation against Biko’s monumentalization, and an aversion to the reduction of his own poetry to propaganda, or “a health awareness campaign.”¹⁵⁸ Perhaps more strongly than in either Bofelo’s or Magogodi’s work, this performativity produces in Bila’s poetry and statements about his poetry a pervasive insistence upon the autonomy of his poetics from pre-determinations, including even expectations about the political content of his poetry:

I don’t want to sound like a preacher or a statement poet who always protests, who’s always angry, and so on. I want people to also feel the poetry in the anger [...] When people read my poems they must read the poems of a poet who is all sorts of things. But it must not just be the extension of another Marxist, even though I believe in Marxism. I must not just be an extension of anything. I think I can contribute something to what exists. I can contribute to knowledge, to new knowledge and insight in this world. Because otherwise, the problem of limited ideologies is that you remain stuck. You can’t do any proper thinking beyond what is given

¹⁵⁸ Vonani Bila, Interview with T. Spreelin MacDonald 2 July 2007.

as the ultimate. And I don't believe that there is anything like an ultimate idea. Knowledge must increase everyday. And if my poetry helps to contribute to something new, I am happy.¹⁵⁹

Here, the performative dynamic of Bila's poetics comes to the fore as he states his intention to "contribute something to what exists [...] to new knowledge and insight in this world." Rejecting "blueprints"¹⁶⁰ or the reduction of his poetics to "limited ideologies" which render the poet "stuck" in their service, Bila strongly echoes Benston's indictment of monumentalization, through which Coltrane's (like Biko's, Marx's etc.) "'truth' is treated as tautology."¹⁶¹

Despite his rejection of "limited ideologies," Bila's links with Biko could not be more evident than in such statements. His assertion of his poetics— "it must not just be the extension of another Marxist, even though I believe in Marxism. I must not just be an extension of anything"—as an autonomous creative enterprise rings strongly with Biko's own articulation of Black Consciousness, particularly in Biko's assertion that, "thinking along lines of Black Consciousness makes the black man see himself as a being, entire in himself, and not as an extension of a broom or additional leverage to some machine."¹⁶² Here, Bila invokes the aversion to being an "extension" inscribed within Biko's essays to assert his own creative autonomy.

It was in relation to this tension in Bila's writing that I asked him in 2009, "Do you ever feel that the weight of bringing justice, or fight[ing for] justice, ever has a

¹⁵⁹ Vonani Bila, Interview with T. Spreelin MacDonald 2 July 2007.

¹⁶⁰ Wilderson 102; Mngxitama, et al., "Biko Lives" 16.

¹⁶¹ Benston 151.

¹⁶² Biko, *I Write* 68.

negative effect upon your writing, maybe by imposing some ideological issues?" Bila rejected the notion that his poems simply derive from his ideological leanings, stating:

How I react to issues of injustice is spontaneous. So, it's not necessarily ideological on my part. I react to these things because my heart says this is right, this is wrong, and I follow my heart. Because I follow my heart, even the kinds of images that I use to portray such ugliness wouldn't necessarily be complimentary to an ideological pigeonhole. So, I try to balance my ideological inclinations with what comes through naturally. So, I'm not a propagandist. [...] I don't write saying I'm a socialist, I'm a Black Consciousness person. I am this. I write as a human being. If there are these influences, showing off through my work I appreciate it because it means my work is located in a given context. It would be sad if my work was devoid of any context, because it would mean that my experiences are very inept, very empty. So, I think it enriches my poetry, the fact that I am involved in various social activities.

While Bila here is unable or unwilling to entirely divorce his work from its "context," he is explicit about the necessity of believing in the independence of his poetics from ideological pre-determination.

Although this unresolved tension between Bila's "context" and his performative self-determination curiously washes out at points in such liberal humanist statements as, "I write as a human being"—which have the effect of de-politicizing his work—what I see more fundamentally at work here is an elaboration of Biko's performative rejection of

being an “extension” of pre-determined, monumentalized symbols and ideologies. The poet must create, Bila maintains, and cannot possibly do so if their work is fashioned as a second-order phenomenon, subordinate to monuments and tautological truths.

This commitment is more than some form of pure aestheticism, though, as is evident in Bila’s strident criticisms of other poets who invoke the names of Biko and other revolutionaries for, presumably, shallow materialistic purposes. “My poetry is heavy on the willy-nilly mouthing of slogans about how being black is beautiful and quoting Biko and Fanon in speeches,” Bila thus explained to Michelle McGrane in a 2005 interview, “when the lips which speak of these people act against the doctrines of the same people, their heroes.”¹⁶³ Bila expanded upon this assertion in an essay titled “The Irrelevance of Prizes to Poetry,”¹⁶⁴ protesting the rise of a crop of post-apartheid poets whose primary function seems to be praising political leaders (past and present) and multinational corporations that pay poets generously to perform at large functions. Bila accordingly indicts such poets for their political hypocrisy and aesthetic conservativeness:

You can call these clowns anything, but certainly not poets. The kind of content that characterizes their scribbling is inept human rights rhetoric, slogans about non-existent transformation and change [...] They call Biko,

¹⁶³ Vonani Bila, Interview with Michelle McGrane, *Litnet*, 8 December 2009 <http://www.oulitnet.co.za/relax/vonani_bila.asp>.

¹⁶⁴ Vonani Bila, “The Irrelevance of Prizes to Poetry,” *New Coin Poetry* 41.2 (2005) 7-11.

Hani and Sobukwe's¹⁶⁵ names without having read enough of the doctrines these fighters pursued in their lifetime. Surely this kind of poetry does not add anything new to what already exists? After listening to the same oft-repeated lines, you know these poets are not original.¹⁶⁶

Here, the performative stakes of Bila's critique are evident, as he fuses his indictment of these poets' political hypocrisy with their lack of aesthetic originality. He thus cites both their political fault in praising "non-existent transformation and change," and their aesthetic fault in "not add[ing] anything new to what already exists."

Moreover, Bila indicts poetry competitions for fostering such politically and aesthetically conservative engagements with the legacies of Biko and other revolutionaries, stating that "Competitions simply touch the surface and have the potential to create egoistic individuals that couldn't care less about the bigger struggle for humanity," for which such political figures presumably stood for. The fault of this field of competition poetry is thus double in Bila's logic, being a shallow engagement with both the political and aesthetic implications of Biko's legacy. Lacking a politically progressive or aesthetically "original" engagement with this legacy, this poetry thus lacks the creative function of poetry, Bila asserts. To be un-original is thus to fail at the most basic level of Bila's performative understanding of poetics by failing to create something new. In a context defined by the normativity of antiblackness, bland, a-political poetic redundancy is thus equitable to antiblackness itself.

¹⁶⁵ Chris Hani (1942-1993) was the leader of the South African Communist Party. Robert Sobukwe (1924-1978) was the leader of the Pan African Congress, a South African political party.

¹⁶⁶ Bila, "The Irrelevance" 8-9.

When I asked Bila about such indictments of his fellow poets, and about the particular vulnerability of performance poetry to materialism and the ossification and commodification of Biko's image in the process, he explained,

I think the new writers, new poets, particularly, mainly urban poets, are struggling to create an identity for themselves, but an identity that will make sense to themselves and the people around them, and also make them relevant in the world. If you come from South Africa, the easiest thing is to celebrate Nelson Mandela. Then, because the world knows Nelson Mandela, then you become relevant. If you are a populist, socialist, you can put on Che Guevara shirts, then you become relevant. Wow. We don't need to understand more about Che Guevara.

Bila here identifies the weight of the "name made common," as Veriava and Naidoo term it, as it impresses itself as an un-originality upon poetic invocations of political figures like Che Guevara and Biko. While providing some "context" in which poets' work can be recognized, this commonness carries with it the almost impossibly heavy burden of a shallow ("populist") pre-determined value, a tautological truth from which poets struggle (or not, depending on their aspirations) to "add anything new to what already exists." If poets seek to exceed the function of monumentalization, Bila suggests, and thus to create poetry out of the absence imposed by antiblackness, their performance must be marked by transgression of the norms surrounding the popular reception of such icons.

Thus, Bila levels demands upon his fellow poets:

I think if people mention Biko and they are committed to the philosophy of Black Consciousness, we should see that in action. We should see them at least distancing themselves from the demands of consumerism. But, instead, these are poets who are able to pour out, not necessarily their feelings, but they pour out things that officials, the powers that be, want to hear, so that they can be paid. And they get paid because they say the messages that are in line with public policy. So, their poetry becomes an attachment of some kind of tourism promotional materials, which compromises their own talents. Some of them are talented, but because they want to live, they enter poetry as a platform to make a living. And I think poetry is not necessarily an area where you can decide now I want to make a living. I mean, you can make a living if you are lucky, if you are invited to perform all over the world, and so forth, but that is not the reason why people write poetry. They write poetry because of important events in their own personal lives, their lives around their communities, and so on. So, I think people have bastardized images of Biko, Sobukwe, and everyone else, just to attain their narrow selfish interests, mainly money [...] And if they mention Mandela, are you going to expect the head of a certain corporate to be annoyed? In fact, it's more credit shown to that sort of person [...] someone who mentions Biko, it means somehow they've got an association with that person. But if it's a commercial prank, which I think it is, it distorts what some of these

leaders stood for and continue to stand for. And consequently, you end up with Gucci socialists.

The monumentalization of Biko and Guevara as icons of “Gucci socialists” in certain strains of popular (“populist”) poetry, is thus problematic on both political and aesthetic grounds for Bila. Such poets fail to divorce themselves from being “extensions” of conservative institutions, and “their poetry becomes an attachment of some kind of tourism promotional materials.” Politically, this is inexcusable within Bila’s interpretation of Black Consciousness, because this politically comfortable, “common” Biko contradicts the basic premise (“third front,” as Mngxitama, Alexander and Gibson have it) of Black Consciousness as a self-determined struggle by those who are socially, politically, and economically excluded. In poetic terms, Bila cannot reconcile his understanding of Black Consciousness poetry as self-determined transgression and as a poetics that derives from and details “important events in their own personal lives, their lives around their communities,” and one that un-originally inhabits and buttresses the very economic and cultural dispensation that, at the end of the day, *creates the rural* as an abandoned and excluded space. As such, Bila’s strong censure of the poetry that he feels trades upon shallow, commodified representations of Biko and Black Consciousness derives from his understanding of Black Consciousness as a philosophy of the excluded, and poetry as the “labor of the scream,” un-amenable to monumentalization.

Ultimately, Bila’s rejection of monumentalized versions of Biko and Black Consciousness reveals the assumption of black performativity at the heart of his poetics. This is evident in Bila’s leveraging of Biko’s symbolic value as a revolutionary leader

against which corrupt contemporary leaders are judged inadequate in poems such as “The Kowtowing Chiefs.” It is also evident in the more sedimented uses of Biko’s framing of blackness in poems such as “Silences,” as well as in Bila’s rejection of being an “extension” of pre-determined ideas and figures in his own reflexive statements about his poetry. Biko’s performative construction of black writing thus underwrites much of Bila’s rural poetry, as an open-ended struggle to emerge from the marginal space of rural South Africa.

CHAPTER 5: BANTU GHOSTS: “A STRANGE COMMITMENT”

*“in the nocturnal noise of its concatenation, the rumbling sound of ghosts chained to
ghosts”*

*Jacques Derrida*¹⁶⁷

The struggle within Vonani Bila’s poetry between the mandate to “create something new” through a self-determined poetics and the weight of his ideological precedents (the influence of Biko and others) upon that effort dramatizes a tension that animates many Biko poems. That is, while asserting the necessity of “original[ity]” to the very practice of poesis, of poetry making, ironically Bila does so through Biko’s very logic of not being an “extension” of any pre-conceived concepts. Bila’s rejection of Biko’s ultimate authority over his work is thus effected in no small part through Biko’s own terms of blackness as a self-determined performance from absence. In his most reflexive moments Bila recognizes the irresolvable nature of this paradoxical play between the mandate to arise originally as an affective presence and the inscription of one’s temporal and ideological context in such a performance, stating that he tries, “to balance my ideological inclinations with what comes through naturally.” In this paradox, the “labor of the scream,” as the struggle of poetry to emerge in self-determination from a position of absence, is inscribed with the impossibility of completely expunging Biko’s imprint upon it. In this chapter, I will discuss this paradox as a productive tension with

¹⁶⁷ Jacques Derrida *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 2006 [1994]) 3.

contemporary Biko poems, as they unfold as always incomplete efforts to realize their own autonomy from Biko's precedent.

This paradoxical effort has been described by Jacques Derrida as the "strange commitment" of attempting to come to life. While a commitment to self-determination is a necessary one, Derrida concedes, he argues that this struggle is always mediated or "haunted" by specters.¹⁶⁸ "[N]othing is more necessary," Derrida argues, than the "wisdom" of self-determination in the struggle for political life. "It is ethics itself: to learn to live—alone, from oneself, by oneself. Life does not know how to live otherwise." Yet this necessity is inscribed with the impossibility of banishing spectral others because it is through these lurking others that life is defined:

But to learn to live, to learn it *from oneself and by oneself*, all alone, to teach *oneself* to live ("I would like to learn to live finally"), is that not impossible for a living being? Is it not what logic itself forbids? To live, by definition, is not something one learns. Not from oneself, it is not learned from life, taught by life. Only from the other and by death [...]

¹⁶⁸ In a more formal literary reading this dynamic could be interpreted in terms of intertextuality, as a form of what Harold Bloom has famously termed the "anxiety of influence," whereby literary works are understood to be fundamentally marked by their struggles to exceed the precedents of previous literary works. Postcolonial literary scholars such as Byron Caminero-Santangelo have pushed studies of postcolonial intertextuality somewhat beyond such strictly formal understanding of intertextuality, observing that "the postcolonial author comes out not just through the revision of the European classic," or, one must add, African literary classics, "but, just as important, through its engagement with the larger social (colonial) text that supposedly speaks through the classic," as well as the specific historical circumstances of the African literary work itself. See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford UP, 1973); and Byron Caminero-Santangelo, *African Fiction and Joseph Conrad: Reading Postcolonial Intertextuality* (Albany, NY: State University of New York P, 2005) 11.

This is, therefore, a strange commitment, both impossible and necessary, for a living being supposed to be alive. “I would like to learn to live.” It has no sense and cannot [be] just unless it comes to terms with death. Mine as (well as) that of the other.¹⁶⁹

Self-determination can in these terms be understood as simultaneously a necessity and an impossibility, in that “learning to live” can only be accomplished through a “heterodidactics between life and death,” that is, in the mediation of the emergent self through a spectral or ghostly other.¹⁷⁰ The self-determined act of coming to life, Derrida asserts, “can only *maintain* itself with some ghost, can only *talk with or about* some ghost.”¹⁷¹

This “strange commitment” is tremendously descriptive of the tension which arises in Biko poems as they assume black performativity (the performance of “political life for the sake of establishing political life” in Gordon’s terms) through and against, at times, Biko’s specter, a necessity which impresses upon these poems the anxiety of not being entirely “original” (in Bila’s terms), despite the necessity of self-determination for black performativity.

This phenomenon—“hauntology” as Derrida terms it—is not only an aspect of Bila’s work, but also a constitutive tension within the works of a number of contemporary South African poets as they engage in the paradoxical performance of black poetics through Biko’s specter. Hauntology arises, for example, in the work of

¹⁶⁹ Derrida xvii.

¹⁷⁰ Derrida xvii.

¹⁷¹ Derrida xvii.

Kgafela oa Magogodi who has perhaps most openly and often troped upon Biko's name and maxims in his poetry. Despite the deliberate nature of his references to Biko, Magogodi evinces the ambiguity of this "strange commitment" by attempting to distance himself and his poetics from Biko's ultimate authority. This is evident in an interview with Audrey McCluskey, in which Magogodi stated that,

Biko was a man of his time. I'm not interested in turning him into part of this political aristocracy. I am just interested in his spirit, and then I move on. A Biko of his time would appreciate it if you engaged people about issues in the present, not simply making it a mosaic piece and misquoting, without saying anything about the present.¹⁷²

Investing Biko with an "appreciation" of Magogodi's own imperative to "move on," this statement accomplishes the paradoxical maneuver of attempting to release the poet from Biko's authority through Biko's very example. "A Biko of his time would appreciate—" becomes the grounds through which Magogodi seeks to establish his independence. That is, Magogodi seeks to accomplish this release not by refuting Biko's logic, but by inhabiting his logic and moving with his haunting specter (which crosses times to give consent to Magogodi's desire to "move on"). The statement is thus not a complete exorcism of Biko's mediating influence upon the poet's attempt to performatively actualize self-determination. Rather, it reinscribes Biko and accomplishes the poet's attempt to emerge in the present through the hauntological. The poet may "move on," but he moves on with Biko's "spirit" as a validating power.

¹⁷² Kgafela oa Magogodi, Interview with McCluskey, 100.

A similar dynamic arises in Bandile Gumbi's relation to Biko. While her poems such as "After the Fact"¹⁷³ register Biko's strong imprint, her poetics are also inscribed with a logic of self-determination posited in tension with Biko's spectrality. "After the Fact" begins,

In supposedly post times
 After the apartheid fact
 In the 25th year
 Since the murder of Bantu Biko
 He lingers that's a fact

In intimate forms
 Like nakedness and truth

These opening lines of "After the Fact" register Biko's "lingering" presence. But rather than invoking Biko in celebration of the successes of the post-apartheid present, Gumbi invokes Biko against this suspect ("supposedly post") dispensation. Biko's spirit impresses upon this "post," "intimate" questions of "nakedness and truth" presumably otherwise elided. That is, Biko's "lingering" is cast as effecting a transgressive revealing power, unmasking the constitutive *unnakedness* (obfuscations) and *untruths* (lies) of this post-apartheid dispensation.

Moreover, Biko's lingering spirit impresses upon the "post" poet certain challenges, as "After the Fact" proceeds to elaborate:

¹⁷³ Bandile Gumbi, "After the Fact," *Pangs of Initiation* (Somerset West, South Africa: H.A. Hodge, 2004) 2-3.

In these supposedly post times
 I linger
 With my pen in midstroke
 Anticipating the post fact
 That never succumbs to the hype
 Of bumper sticker consciousness
 Nor the label bc@levi.co.za

The poet “lingers” with Biko “in midstroke,” unable to entirely absorb her poetics into a “supposedly post times” dominated by a prevalent superficial “bumper sticker consciousness.” Against glib gestures to revolutionary consciousness, such as corporate email addresses (bc@levi.co.za) referencing Black Consciousness (BC), the poet struggles to articulate a relation to Biko’s legacy not overcome by Biko’s contemporary revaluation as a symbol of elite black privilege. The poem continues:

Biko is in parliament
 Driving a *yengeni*¹⁷⁴
 Living in yuppiedom
 These are definitely post times
 Vibrations: Struggle my life!
 Burned with the 80’s
 But the phoenix is yet to rise from the ashes.

¹⁷⁴ As the poem’s footnote states, “Yengeni-nickname for the 4 x 4 cars with a fifth wheel [rear-mounted spare tire] named after Tony Yengeni former South African member of parliament who drove one, and was charged [sic, charged] with fraud.”

The poet's search for a "post fact" is thus conceived herein as the effort to revive a struggle "Burned with the 80's" in the "post-" moment. As the once and future ("phoenix") marker of this struggle, Biko serves as the crossroads of this struggle. Out of necessity, the poet seeks to dislodge the dominant "post" Biko from its associations with elite privilege ("parliament," luxury automobiles/"Yengenis"), and align Biko more closely with the poetic struggle for "nakedness and truth."

While its struggle over Biko's legacy is disruptive of the monumentalization of Biko and the comfortable temporal banishment of the past from the present ("lingering," "supposedly post," "phoenix"), it simultaneously places Biko's "lingering" specter as the mediating factor in realizing "nakedness and truth," as well as the poet's "post fact," thus suggesting that the poet cannot entirely transcend Biko's pressure upon her writing. This tension is more directly evinced in Gumbi's other writings, such as in an electronic "E-Zine" created by the South African arts collective, the Dead Revolutionaries Club, of which Gumbi is listed as a co-creator.

At the top of the front page of this E-Zine, immediately below the image of a blackface minstrel, appears the following declaration:

The Dead Revolutionaries Club came about through a long process that we do not have the time, money and energy to bore you with except to say we were tired of seeing the same ol' dry uninteresting art writing, the same ol' usual suspects, the same ol' boring perspectives and especially the lack of criticality in the South African art scene. You may wonder why Dead Revolutionaries? Somehow revolutionaries, just like artists, gain star-like

status once they are dead and so we pay tribute to dead revolutionaries who continue to inspire us to be troublemakers. But dead revolutionaries are just that—dead—and our futures can only be changed by what we do ourselves and not what we wear on our T-shirts. So we decided to not only look back, but also look ahead, to each other and to ourselves to make a difference, to create, to fight, to poke fun at, to rip off and to challenge.¹⁷⁵


The “deadness” of revolutionaries and the desire to “also look ahead, to each other and to ourselves” in the act of creating thus motivates this injunction. This is in part due to the pressure of monumentalization, as the Dead Revolutionaries Club laments the fact that “Somehow revolutionaries, just like artists, gain star-like status once they are dead.”

While these artists “pay tribute to dead revolutionaries who continue to inspire us to be troublemakers,” they nonetheless assert that “our futures can only be changed by what we do ourselves and not what we wear on our T-shirts.” The gesture is a hauntological one, in that the subversiveness of the present—the self-determined act of pledging “to create, to fight, to poke fun at, to rip off and to challenge”—is haunted and enabled by the “inspirat[ion]” of the very dead revolutionaries who this statement defines as “just that—dead.” This summary banishment to death is obviously ineffective in dispelling the spectral mediation of these revolutionaries on the present, but rather accomplishes this very call to action “to be troublemakers,” through these ghosts.

¹⁷⁵ *The Dead Revolutionaries Club*. 7 March 2010. <<http://deadrevolutionariesclub.co.za/>>.

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**DEAD
REVOLUTIONARIES
CLUB**

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Figure 1: The Dead Revolutionaries Club.

¹⁷⁶ *The Dead Revolutionaries Club*. 7 March 2010. <<http://deadrevolutionariesclub.co.za/>>.

This hauntological tension finds its most dynamic exploration in the work of Lesego Rampolokeng. In terms highly evocative of Derrida's own opening remarks in *Specters of Marx*,¹⁷⁷ Rampolokeng stated to me in a 2009 interview,

I'm about the living word, about attempting to come to life. I've only existed. Up 'till now I've been existing. I haven't come to life yet because there's all this filth that's standing between me and the celebration of that which is mine. That's what I'm reaching for. That's what Biko and all the rest of them... That's why I had to keep feeding myself on them, hoping that one day I will arrive at that which renders me and my life on the same level as all those other shitheads. I want to be a shithead too. Just like them, because it seems to be glorious.¹⁷⁸

Rampolokeng's gesture of self-determination, "attempting to come to life," trading mere "exist[ence]" for life, construes poetry as a struggle to realize selfhood against death and domination ("all this filth that's standing between me and the celebration of that which is mine"). And this struggle "feeds" upon dead revolutionaries such as Steve Biko, hoping to come to life "on the same level as all those other shitheads." In pitting the realization of his life and poetics against such "filth," and invoking Biko's specter in the process, Rampolokeng's statement posits the struggle for "life" and poetics "the living word," (often with apparent unwillingness) *through* the mediation of Biko's ghost and the ghosts of other writers and revolutionaries.

¹⁷⁷ "Someone, you or me, comes forward and says: *I would like to learn to live finally*" (Derrida xvi).

¹⁷⁸ Lesego Rampolokeng, Interview with T. Spreelin MacDonald, 29 August 2009.

This “strange commitment” evinces itself in Rampolokeng’s attempts to articulate his self-determined relation to “the living word” (often rendered in his poetry as THE WORD). When I asked Rampolokeng about the frequency of this concept in his writing he couched his response in an attack upon other contemporary writers that he feels seek some affiliation with him by using the term also:

Yes. Yes. Yes. And some third generation monkey clones have started using it too. Started creating. I’m not great, no, but I just want to give you an example. If the first thing you do before you write is look at what I’ve written, and take what I have written and simplify it, and pass it as your own, when your idea of a great rhyme is “it is simple to pop a pimple,” and you go around telling people, “hey, you know, I was with Lesego yesterday and we were discussing this” [...] That’s why I’m fed up. I’m not great. But I’ll give you just an example. [...] “Yesterday I was at Michael’s. You know, Michael Jackson. And hey that guy can make you laugh. He didn’t want to, but at some point he said, guys, I need to go into my oxygen tank now. And we had to leave very unfortunately.” More than just name-dropping. I’m saying, you do that. You build up as many such stories as possible. The world starts believing that you and this Michael guy...when they hear you playing they say, “ahh, they’re from a school. So, it’s only natural that there’s a similarity.” You are associated, so you become great by association.

I belong to no school, my brother. I do *not* sit around across tables discussing shit with anybody: “so, how should we approach...” No. No. *No*. It’s a solitary act for me when I write. My entire human, or inhuman, subhuman, whatever you want to define me as...I’m not that. I’m not that. I’m not that. I’m what I defined myself as. I’m saying, I’m sitting there, my entire universe, every single thing I’ve ever touched, felt, smoked, drunk, kissed, rubbed skins with, or run away from rubbing skins with, all of it comes to bear on the pen I’m holding in my hand when I write. It’s got nothing to do with being against anything [...] What I am just saying is simply this: When I write, I’m alone. But I’m a social creature. I grew out of some place. There were minds that were there that helped mold my mind. I read like you wouldn’t believe. I don’t read so as to know, “ah, this is how...” No. The reason I read is to find out what paths have been trod, so as not to go there [...] Shakespeare was great. You’re telling me Shakespeare was the god of poets. You can’t go above Shakespeare. This is what great poetry is, this thing that that Shakespeare wrote. Much respect man. Love. Love. If what you wrote was great, I don’t want to go there. I’m going there [indicating another direction], because my path leads *there*. It’s not dictated by you. You understand?¹⁷⁹

This passage is a swirl of rejections and affiliations, the “strange commitment” of hauntology unfolded in a stream of associations and disassociations. Rampolokeng

¹⁷⁹ Rampolokeng, Interview with MacDonald.

stridently rejects being reduced to his associations, both in the works of others who presumably seek to build up their own reputations through affiliation with him and his poetry, as well as in his own reading and writing process: “It’s a solitary act for me when I write [...] I’m what I defined myself as”; “The reason I read is to find out what paths have been trod, so as not to go there”; “my path leads *there*. It’s not dictated by you.” But these rejections are also combined with paradoxical affiliations: “When I write, I’m alone. But I’m a social creature”; “There were minds that were there that helped mold my mind”; “all of it comes to bear on the pen I’m holding in my hand when I write”; “It’s got nothing to do with being against anything.” This “living word,” as Rampolokeng follows it, is evidently propelled in tension with precedent, with the spectrality of Shakespeare and others through and against which he defines his own productive trajectory.

Nowhere is this “strange commitment” more evident in Rampolokeng’s work than in his play *Bantu Ghost: A Stream of (black) Unconsciousness*.¹⁸⁰ I attended this play on its opening night at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg on 1 September 2009. At the outset of the play, Rampolokeng sits stage right at a weathered school desk, its wooden top carved up and chipped, reading in the tiny light of a single white candle burning beside his papers. Dressed in white shoes, white socks, white slacks, white shirt, and a grey cap over his dreadlocks, Rampolokeng slumps in a white plastic chair, elbows on his school desk, and reads out loud.

¹⁸⁰ Lesego Rampolokeng, *Bantu Ghost: A Stream of (black) Unconsciousness*, dir. Bobby Rodwell, perf. Lesego Rampolokeng and Nelisiwe Xaba, Market Theatre, Johannesburg, 1 September 2009.

He begins with a vision of blackness and non-whiteness in three quotations, the names of the authors cited read as if they are the final words of each quotation:

black is not what white is not, black is black

tender fingers in a clenched fist

we are listening to the blackness inside the dream-Lemn Sissay

the fact that we are not all white does not necessarily mean we are all black.

Non-whites exist and will continue to exist for a long time-Steven Biko

Black is energetic release from the shackles of kaffir bantu non-white—
Mafika Gwala

These three quotations sketch out the particular terms through which Rampolokeng is performing this “stream of (black) unconsciousness.” To begin with the last quotation: in “Getting off the Ride” (discussed in the Introduction), Mafika Gwala, one of the most prominent Black Consciousness poets in the 1970s, defines the positive terms of blackness as an “energetic release” from outside determination, from imposed identities (“kaffir bantu non-white”). This is a performative blackness against which Rampolokeng contrasts the “(black) unconsciousness” of his play’s title.

The quote of Biko that precedes Gwala’s is a warning of such a state of “unconscious” non-whiteness, of existence as an appendage to whiteness. Furthermore casting this non-white unconsciousness into the future (“will continue to exist for a long

time”), the quote projects its danger beyond Biko’s own time into the post-apartheid present. It also underscores the crucial point that blackness in terms of Black Consciousness is not a biological gift or essence, but a politics of self-determination that can easily lapse into unconsciousness and non-whiteness without its performance.

This performative mandate is further substantiated (in fact initiated if we take the quotes in their order of reading) in the quote of Sissay. This declaration, “black is not what white is not, black is black,” posits one of the most basic yet often elided aspects of Black Consciousness, that it is not a rejection of whiteness, but a rejection of non-whiteness, of non-being. It seeks not to impose a Manichean struggle of opposites, but posits blackness as its own affective politics with its own potentialities. The Sissay quote also disrupts the typical Black Consciousness narrative in South African literary and cultural history, which typifies its rise as a spin-off of the Black Power Movement in the United States in the late 1960s, and its arch largely co-extensive with Biko’s (d. 1977) short life. Sissay’s inclusion here is thus disruptive to this historical narrative. Not only is Sissay, a contemporary black British poet whose parents immigrated to England from Ethiopia, not representative of an African American precedent for South African Black Consciousness, this quotation is taken from Sissay’s first book of poems, the 1988 collection *Tender Fingers in a Clenched Fist*, published over a decade after Biko’s death. Rampolokeng thus posits a much more dynamic and ongoing field of Black Consciousness as the context of this play by including Sissay’s quotation in its epigraph.

But there is a third aspect of these quotes, most evident within Sissay’s, that produces an added effect throughout the play. Sissay’s quote, like many in the play, is

heavily abridged, reformed, from its original iteration in *Tender Fingers in a Clenched Fist*. The lines ascribed to Sissay are actually not those of a poem, but the amalgamation of the title of his book, *Tender Fingers in a Clenched Fist*, and the titles of two of his poems in that volume. That is, Rampolokeng is actively excising and recombining bits of others' writing, and reforming these writings to his own ends. In reconstituting these citations, and exerting his vision upon the terms in which he receives his affiliations with Sissay, Biko, Gwala and other figures cited throughout the play, Rampolokeng forefronts the struggle to originally *create* that underwrites this "strange commitment." This is poetry, after all, the poet is reminding us, and while the hauntological presence of its precedents (Biko, Gwala, Sissay, etc.) may prevent it from constituting itself as pure self-determined expression, it is nonetheless the productive effort to come to (poetic) life.

After this opening epigraph, titled "Prelude" within the script, *Bantu Ghost* unfolds in a series of "Chapters," each opened with abstract dances by the play's choreographer and dancer Nelisiwe Xaba. Each dance is accordingly followed by Rampolokeng reading a litany of images, evoking the unconsciousness pervading contemporary black South African life:

B.G.¹⁸¹ is institutionalized demented abstract addict

OR saintly prisoner experiment for the Pavlovs of power

possessed by Biko's spirit

[...]

& here we go again, dead on the march

¹⁸¹ Bantu Ghost

sung like Percy Sledge: 'I've got dreams, dreams to dismember'

[...]

they abducted the song deranged the lyrics

Re-mixed Africa to an insipid riff off God-way

We live by the grace of the horde

It was not liberation but a stay of execution

[...]

We are as conscientised as brown waste material.

Still, we feel like volcanoes at rest.

Fallen down the power-thrill mountain.

All wearing their own thought-proof vest.

Pus oozes from out mouths, deep wounds' attempt to speak.

Mid-expletive the flow is cut the larynx cut.

Babble from the television bestial shuts us down.

Sense collapses before the brain-disease transmission

And so *Bantu Ghost* unfolds in a thick onslaught of grotesque imagery true to what Mark Waller, in an analogy to the 1960s music productions of Phil Spector, has termed Rampolokeng's "wall of sound" poetics.¹⁸² These readings interplay with Xaba's tortured movements, whose body mocks hyper-sexualized Zulu maiden dances and the pained indifference of suburban beauty queens, as it struggles, endlessly to lift itself from the dead heavy weight of this unconsciousness. Together, Rampolokeng's readings and

¹⁸² Mark Waller, "Ranting Fat Arses," *Sweet Magazine* 1 (2005), 13 February 2010 <www.substancebooks.co.za/index2.php?option=content&do_pdf=1&id=64>.

Xaba's movements combine to evoke a non-white present saturated by the grotesque realities of the post-apartheid revaluation of blackness into self-hatred, corruption, xenophobia, and, generally, antiblackness.

Yet, this is a present also "possessed by Biko's spirit," which survives this colossal collapse of consciousness:

Black flaps to the rhythm of no flag

It's the wind that survives the epoch

Key to this persistent haunting amidst this "state of anaesthesia" is the duality of the term "bantu" as it is deployed within the play. As in Magogodi's "Freedom is Failing," "bantu" is in one sense the un-assuaged ghost of being a "bantu," that is, a non-white, determined still in the antiblack terms of colonialism. On the other hand, "bantu" is the ghost of Steve *Bantu* Biko, the persisting haunting of anti-colonial and anti-racist resistance which transcends the colonial/post-colonial dichotomy, "flap[ing] to the rhythm of no flag." The duality of the term both unmask the persistence of antiblackness in the present (being as "Bantus") and Steve Bantu Biko's haunting transgressiveness in this unmasking.

This haunting is most evident in "Chapter Four" of *Bantu Ghost*, sub-titled "Read Brother Read." Unlike the rest of the play's saturation with images of unconsciousness, this "chapter" re-invokes the vision of *consciousness* in the play's "Prelude." The act begins with a dance by Xaba, comprised of her unsuccessfully attempting to lift her black fist to the sky. Elsewhere, Xaba describes this movement as the struggles of a "sick fist,"

suggesting the weakened incompleteness of that iconic gesture of Black Power in the present.¹⁸³

Xaba's "sick fist" dance, titled "Uprising" in the script, is followed by a musical interlude. In darkness, Diamanda Galas' jarring cover of the African American spiritual "Were you there when they crucified my lord"¹⁸⁴ is played loudly over the house speakers.

Were you there when they crucified my lord?

Were you there when they nailed him to the cross?

Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble

Were you there when they crucified my lord?

Were you there when they dragged him to the grave?

Were you there when they dragged him to the grave?

Sometimes it causes me to wonder, wonder

Were you there?

Were you there?

Were you there?

Galas' song is unsettling to say the least. Her persistent unanswered question is both heart wrenching and accusative, suggesting that the listener is party to the crucifixion of Christ, and, by extension in the play, Steve Biko and Black Consciousness.

¹⁸³ *Artsworld*, AlJazeera. 30 August 2008 part 2. <www.youtube.com/user/AlJazeeraEnglish#play/search/19/qKbkOZxAfQw>.

¹⁸⁴ Diamanda Galas, "Were you there when they crucified my lord?" *The Singer*, Mute U.S., 1992.

Following these lines, the song breaks open in the full-throated glass-shattering “glossolalia” for which Galas’ avant-garde performance style is known for. Sharp and inescapable within the pitch-black of the theatre, one feels the “labor of the scream” literally reverberating through them.

After these prolonged shrieks, Galas resumes the persistent question the hymn poses:

Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?

Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?

Sometimes, sometimes, sometimes, sometimes,

Sometimes it causes me to wonder, wonder, wonder

Were you there?

Were you there?

Were you there when they crucified my lord?

Not only is this song startling in its sonic dissonance, but in its imagery of crucifixion and unanswered questions as they are put into play with Biko’s legacy as a martyr. The circumstances of Biko’s death are, after all, still largely obscured by “the lies and evasions”¹⁸⁵ of the apartheid government which ordered his assassination and by those police officers who carried it out, as well as the ineptitude of subsequent bodies of inquiry in unmasking the circumstances of his assassination. As Mark Sanders has observed,

¹⁸⁵ Sanders 159.

It might be said, then, that we know nothing about those days—or nothing that can be separated from the untruths of its perpetrators, the only ones with him at the time. Steve Biko’s death and its prelude remain obscured in a haze of prevarication. There is no one who can be trusted, as is usual in funerary remembrance of the dead, to “talk about how he died” (Biko, *Black Consciousness* 201). That blocks his being mourned and scars his legacy.¹⁸⁶

Galas’ reoccurring question—“were you there when they crucified my lord?”—thus assumes traction in relation to the un-exorcized, still lingering doubts and obfuscations surrounding Biko’s death, which the transition to the nominally post-apartheid era and its accompanying public spectacles, most specifically the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which investigated Biko’s murder, have not been able to dispel.

Following this musical interlude, Rampolokeng reads a series of quotations similar to those offered up in the “Prelude,” of artists and intellectuals, South African and beyond, past and present. Rampolokeng begins by quoting at length the 1977 Mafika Gwala poem “Getting off the Ride” from which Gwala’s opening quote is sampled:

they say the black ghost is weak
 that it is feeble and cannot go the distance
 i say that’s their wishful thinking...
 no, i know the black ghost...
 i can sit back and watch the screen of black thoughts...

¹⁸⁶ Sanders 159.

sharpeville's¹⁸⁷ black ghost haunts all racists...

i live with this ghost

i've come to love this ghost...

i ask again, what is black?

black is point of self realization

black is point of new reason

black is point of : NO NATIONAL DECEPTION...

black is energetic release from the shackles of kaffir, bantu,

non-white...

Mafika Pascal Gwala

Gwala's quotation is transformed here from Gwala's 1977 sighting of the "black ghost" of anti-colonial resistance in the mid-apartheid context into Rampolokeng's sighting in the *post*-apartheid context. Rather than "feeble" or failed, blackness arises as a struggle up from absence again in the present through Rampolokeng's assumption of Gwala's words:

i say that's their wishful thinking...

no, i know the black ghost...

i can sit back and watch the screen of black thoughts...

and

i live with this ghost

i've come to love this ghost...

¹⁸⁷ The Sharpeville Massacre of 1960.

Bantu Ghosts continues with this ghost sighting, collapsing space and time with a string of quotations from, among others, Biko (“Powerlessness breeds a race of beggars—Biko”),¹⁸⁸ Negritude writers (“we have been lied to: Hitler is not dead—Aime Césaire/& Biko agreed”), Black Arts poets (“Black dada nihilismus—Amiri Baraka”), contemporary South African hip hop artists (“Read more, u ignorant, arrogant negroes—The Hymphatic Thabs”), and Afrofuturists of the present such as Kodwo Eshun (“Ancient Africans are alien gods/From a despotic future—Kodwo Eshun”), and the past, such as Lee “Scratch” Perry:

This old man came with a home-made bomb

This old man came with the bass came with the drum

Came with the strum & the bam bam bam

This old man shot down satan’s space-ship

Why you worship cannibals?

Give me the magic in the ancient Ethiopian scrolls—Lee Scratch Perry

Perry’s song once again offers up the potency of the hauntological. The “home-made bomb” of self-determined transgression “shot down satan’s space-ship,” but it does so through the hauntological “magic in ancient Ethiopian scrolls.”

¹⁸⁸ Biko may have stated this, but this statement also derives from Stokely Carmichael’s and Charles Hamilton’s *Black Power*, in which they cite “A national committee of influential black churchmen affiliated with the National Council of Churches” as making the claim that “Powerlessness breeds a race of beggars. We are faced with a situation where powerless conscience meets conscienceless power, threatening the very foundations of our Nation.” Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, (New York: Random House, 1967) 48.

When considered within Rampolokeng's self-professed struggle to come to life through the "living word," these passages in *Bantu Ghost* strongly underscore the "strange commitment" of the hauntological at work in his writing and performance. Both the *conditions* necessitating such a struggle (non-whiteness) and the *means* of resistance (the performative struggle for self-determination) are mediated through the "black ghosts" of Biko and this broader field of intellectuals and artists adopted into the realm of Black Consciousness. Indeed, we may recognize in *Bantu Ghost* the haunted contours of the present in which all of the writers addressed in this study create, a present in which the struggle against absence, the "labor of the scream," is performed through and in relation to the ghosts of Biko and other revolutionaries.

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation I have explored Steve Biko's poetic afterlife. Faced with a disjuncture between a rather rich contemporary field of poems concerned with Biko's legacy and a near total scholarly silence concerning these poems, I have sought here to generate a critical discourse on these Biko poems. In addressing this topic, I have pursued two guiding questions throughout this study: what qualities inhere in Biko's intellectual project that avail his legacy to subsequent poetic elaboration?; and, secondly, in what manners do these qualities manifest in post-apartheid poetry?

In reference to this first question, I examine the reflexive discourse on writing that is embedded within Biko's "I Write What I Like" essays. I show that these essays do more than simply outline Black Consciousness as a politics attuned to generating black political presence. They also crucially dramatized writing as a key mode in which this struggle to assume political presence can be enacted. I call this notion of writing that arises in Biko's essays a performative concept of writing.

This performative notion of writing is evident in the reflexive ways in which Biko's essays draw attention to their own performative labor to "make absences present."¹⁸⁹ Chief among these reflexive tropes are the reoccurring title that Biko used for his essays, "I Write What I Like," as well as in his pen name, Frank Talk. By highlighting the labor inscribed within these essays to break silences surrounding the black self ("I"), and to write its substance ("I like") into presence in a self-determined fashion, these essays draw attention to the centrality of the act of writing to Black Consciousness, as a

¹⁸⁹ Della Pollock, "Performative Writing," *The Ends of Performance*, eds. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York: New York UP, 1998) 81.

struggle for black presence. I accordingly argue that Biko forged in these essays a notion of black performative writing by merging Black Consciousness' struggle for political presence with the performative capacity of writing to function as an event in which the struggle for presence takes place.

It is this performative labor to write absence into presence that I argue is in play when contemporary poets engage Biko's legacy. Yet, while these poets commonly assume this performative notion of writing, they leverage it to speak to diverse formal and ideological concerns in their poetry. One of the key manners in which this performative struggle for presence manifests in these poems is in the effort of many to speak for and as those who are most politically effaced in post-apartheid South Africa. This arises in Bofelo's "Conversation with Bob Marley," as Biko is seated in "shanty Alex" (a Johannesburg township) amongst the poorest of the poor, casting an ominous eye upon the nation's new black elites partying across the street in suburban Sandton. We find this theme similarly invoked in Bofelo's and Magogodi's effort to make black performance poetry speak to "the gut of the ghetto" (Magogodi) in poems such as Bofelo's "I Slam Therefore I Am," and Magogodi's "Freedom is Failing." Perhaps most uniquely, we also find in Vonani Bila's poetry the effort to bring Biko's performativity to bear upon the subject of rural marginality, as poems such as "Silence" and "The Kowtowing Chiefs" invoke Biko in their struggles to speak for a rural population that Bila consistently characterizes as fundamentally politically silenced.

Biko poems also evoke this performativity in their common rejection of those other, largely unnamed poets who fail to make Biko's legacy speak from the margins. In

evoking Biko as an icon of inequitable consumer culture and as an icon of the present political and economic elite, these other poets are seen to evacuate Biko's legacy from its transgressive ability to speak for the most oppressed. Thus, such poets become common fodder for attacks, as the poets studied here castigate these others as "cloned poets" busy "ejaculating sterile verses" (Bofelo, "Conversation with Bob Marley"); "lick-ass poet[s]" giving "blowjobs to politicians" (Magogodi, "i mike what i like"); and as "clowns [...] certainly not poets" (Bila, "The Irrelevance of Prizes to Poetry").

We thus encounter this performativity in these first two senses as a constant political agitation against poems, poets, popular practices and dominant ideologies that threaten separate Biko from his humanistic and politically subversive associations. This pervasive rejection evinces a productive sensitivity within Biko poems to Biko's monumentalization and the concomitant jettisoning of the performative aspects of his legacy in black poetics. This sensitivity is productive in that it constantly agitates within these poets' works for an engagement with Biko's legacy that does not simultaneously steer his legacy away from the struggles of the oppressed to emerge into political presence. This performativity thus impresses upon these poems the mandate to continually tune Biko's voice and their voice as poets to the margins, and to produce poetry not for the interests of the entrenched political and economic elite, but for whatever portions of South African society that remain politically effaced.

This sensitivity creates within these poems a certain flexibility to shifting social concerns, as new social crises arise and new segments of the population are politically subjugated. Thus, we find, for instance, in the poetry of Bofelo ("Verwoed is Black: Biko

is on Holiday”) and Rampolokeng (*Bantu Ghost*) an emergent sensitivity to xenophobia, as they react strongly against the waves of popular resentment, anti-immigrant violence, and subsequent displacement of large populations of immigrants that have gripped South Africa since its 1994 independence. In bending Biko’s voice to speak to such emergent new themes, these poets leverage Biko’s performative capacity to speak from and for those most politically silenced in new directions. In this manner, future research into Biko poems is certain to find Biko’s legacy invoked to address shifting socio-political contexts, and the struggles of new political margins.

This performative labor to speak silences into presence also impresses upon many Biko poems a marked reflexivity about their own capacities and limitations as performative acts. Bofelo’s “I Slam Therefore I Am,” as well as Magogodi’s “i mike what i like” and “Freedom is Fading,” offer up unresolved questions concerning the capacity of performance poetry to overcome the silences imposed on it by the pervasive antiblackness of post-apartheid society and the ephemeral nature of the spoken word; Bila’s “Silence” similarly draws attention to its unresolved labor to break open the crushing silences imposed upon rural people and rural poetry through the perspective of an ever-reflexive witness-speaker; and Gumbi’s “After the Fact” mulls over the inability of the post-apartheid poet to entirely transcend the “lingering” silence imposed upon her by the lack of a “post fact” to distinguish the post-apartheid era from the apartheid era. It is accordingly appropriate that these reflexive engagements with the capacities of these poems to ultimately achieve full presence are left unresolved. In their awareness of their inability to fully speak absences into presence, they re-inscribe the transgressiveness of

Biko's notion of performative writing as an effort that is irresolvable and always attuned to new margins. That is, they refuse to be absorbed into the status quo as conservative monuments to it, and rather retain an ambiguous embrace of the present that continues to always seek out what it silences and leaves unsaid.

Lastly, we find this performativity manifesting in many of these poems as a productive hauntological tension with Biko, himself. The performative struggle in these poems to assume self-determined presence is limited by these poets' inability to ultimately separate themselves from Biko's ghostly precedent. As it is Biko's precedent that they leverage in their attempts to speak from absence, they cannot emerge fully from his shadow. This tension becomes particularly potent in the work of Bila and Rampolokeng, as these poets struggle with the manners in which Biko both underwrites and disallows the completion of their labor to emerge from their own forms of absence in relation to his legacy. The "strange commitment"¹⁹⁰ to struggle for self-determined presence through the spectral precedent of another propels these poems, as they arise through a haunted effort to come to self-determined presence through and in relation to Biko's precedent.

Ultimately, this dissertation suggests that the performative aspect of Biko's legacy allows for a productive, yet truly irresolvable labor within black South African poetry to realize presence through Biko's legacy. In this labor, Biko poems manifest as the struggle to speak from absence, a struggle that remains both politically and aesthetically adaptable across time and shifting socio-political contexts. Moreover, this struggle endures as the

¹⁹⁰ Derrida xvii.

irresolvable “strange commitment” of these poets’ hauntological debt to Biko, in which they leverage his performative notion of writing in their labor to attain self-determined presence, yet cannot entirely expunge their haunting debt to Biko from this labor.

The question of hauntology also suggests future ways in which Biko’s writings and Biko poems can be explored. A key point here is the question of Biko’s intertextual relations with other writers and intellectuals. Biko was, after all, a dialogic thinker whose own writings often cite others’. Little excavation has been done of Biko’s own reading and writing process, and its spectral debts to his interlocutors.

These interlocutors who must be more thoroughly accounted for in future scholarship on Biko’s legacy include his contemporaries in South Africa, such as fellow activists, poets and artists associated with the Black Consciousness Movement. For instance, we know from biographical and autobiographical essays of Biko and his contemporaries, such as Barney Pityana and Mamphela Ramphele, that Biko’s intellectual development came in the midst of a vigorous intellectual ferment among his fellow Black Consciousness activists, and that much of his writing was far from a solitary activity. For example, Ramphele, Biko’s collaborator and long-time partner, reports in her autobiography that she spent many long nights writing down Biko’s “stream of consciousness” thoughts, which she later read back to him as he typed them into essay form.¹⁹¹ Was Ramphele simply an inert mind in this exchange, taking dictation without impressing her own influence upon Biko’s essays? Or, through archival attention, can we discover “her shape in his hand,” as Patricia Williams has termed the spectral presence of

¹⁹¹ Mamphela Ramphele, *Across Boundaries: The Journey of a South African Woman Leader* (New York: Feminist P, 1996) 59.

submerged women's voices in the writings of iconic men?¹⁹² Such questions remain unresolved by this dissertation, but the hauntological approach that I have fostered here allows this and future projects to consider them.

Moreover, Biko also had many interlocutors within a broader African and trans-Atlantic intellectual network. It is difficult, for instance, to read the subtitle of his first "I Write What I Like" essay—"Black Souls in White Skins"—and not be struck by his intellectual debt to Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, or to read his references to Hegelian dialectics without cringing at his (willful?) lack of engagement with the racism inscribed within Hegel's writings on Africa (nor with Fanon's rejection of Hegel's master/slave dialectic in *Black Skin, White Mask*). Biko's writings thus reveal themselves to be highly complicated negotiations with the haunting pressures of their intertexts, negotiations that remain largely un-addressed within scholarship upon Biko.

In the spirit of giving up one's sources, I should note at this juncture that the necessity of such an archival historiography of Biko's writing was impressed upon me by Lesego Rampolokeng in our interview in Johannesburg during August of 2009. Against my inferences that Biko's ideas are somehow singular, Rampolokeng balked, maintaining that, "Cut up Biko and I can tell you, this you will find in Aime Césaire's *Return to My Native Land*.¹⁹³ This you will find in *The Wretched of the Earth*, by Fanon. This you will

¹⁹² Patricia Williams, qtd. in Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: U of Minneapolis P: 2008 [1997]) 5-6. This quotation comes from Williams' *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1991) 19.

¹⁹³ Aime Césaire, *Notebook of the Return to My Native Land*, Trans. and Ed. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2001 [1947]).

find in bla bla by Leon Damas. This by Diop.¹⁹⁴ This by...you know?" What is so fascinating about such statements by contemporary poets is not only the degree to which they urge for an intertextual re-evaluation of Biko's writings by scholars, but also the manners in which they suggest that this strong awareness of Biko's intertextuality is important to their own hauntological engagement with Biko's legacy.

This leads one to ask how Biko's hauntological pressure upon these poets' works can be understood if these poets simultaneously understand Biko's writings to be the product of his own hauntological encounters with Césaire, Fanon, Damas and others? The question here is how to theoretically conceptualize the ways in which Biko seems to arise within these poets' works not as a solid, uncompromising presence, but, rather, as the pressure of an already highly negotiated African and trans-Atlantic discourse on blackness, liberation, and black writing? These unresolved questions of the intertextual and the hauntological aspects of Biko's legacy thus impress upon future studies the mandate to historicize Biko's own development as a writer, while simultaneously exploring the manners in which contemporary poets negotiate Biko's hauntological pressure in full awareness of his heteroglossic voice.

Understanding the complexity of the Black Consciousness tradition also needs more robust ethnographic research than I have been able to effect in this dissertation. Although I have attempted to broach this aspect of contemporary South African poetry by interviewing a number of the poets discussed in this study, and by engaging live performances (such as Rampolokeng's *Bantu Ghost*), as well as digital reproductions of

¹⁹⁴ Negritude poets Leon Damas and David Diop.

Magogodi's performance poems, much has been left unexplored. Thus, while I believe these discussions herein provide important models for further ethnographies of performed Biko poems, they simultaneously gesture to a much more diverse and dynamic repertoire of contemporary Black Consciousness performance poetry that has yet to be studied thoroughly, and which must still be accounted for in gauging the poetic legacy of Biko and Black Consciousness.

These few observations in this conclusion indicate some directions that I believe will enable my future research and the research of others to move in relation to Biko, Black Consciousness, and South African poetry. Animated particularly by an attention to the performative and the hauntological, Biko's poetic legacy can be approached through its archival and non-archival resonances. I hope that such a model of inquiry will make possible an even richer and deeper research project on the subject in the future.

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