Discovering Exiles

‘Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience,’ wrote Edward Said. ‘It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home; its essential sadness can never be surmounted.’


When James Madhlope Phillips died, I knew I had to write about exiles. Like so many others, he left South Africa alone, but unlike many others he sent for his family and rebuilt it in exile. He and his wife Maud managed to buy a terraced house in London. They took in lodgers, South Africans who like themselves had come into exile. Most of the ANC leaders who came to London found their first home with Maud and James: Duma Nokwe, J.B. Marks, Robbie Resha, and many others. Oliver Tambo, who led the ANC in exile for 30 years, lived there with his family, until they could find a place of their own.

James had a wonderful resonant bass voice. All of us in the liberation movement loved to hear him sing. He trained choirs in Wales, the United States, Holland and Germany to sing South African freedom songs. His voice was as deep and as powerful as Paul Robeson’s. He was our Robeson.

James Phillips was, like all the exiles who left South Africa between the late 1950s and the 1990s, removed from his history. The continuity of his and their lives had been broken; they had left the history of their own country, but they did not become part of the history of their host countries. And if memory is the continuity principle for persons, then history is the continuity principle for nations. I wanted to reclaim the right of the exiles to a place in South African history, a right they themselves had earned by their rejection of and resistance to the lives of apartheid; and in the case of white exiles, their rejection of the social values of their class and race. ‘Police files,’ wrote Kundera, ‘are our only claim to immortality.’ I would interview exiles so that they could claim an immortality for themselves.

The exact number of our exiles was not known, but was estimated to be around 60,000 — it was impossible to assess with any accuracy. And often the place of origin of the people who emigrated was blurred. They had left by different routes, crossing borders; they had entered countries without passports or papers; or sometimes had left with exit permits, which denied them the right to return to their own country.

They were scattered throughout the world. Tanzania was perhaps the first and most generous of countries in giving home to exiles, and provided facilities for the ANC’s mission in exile. Many lived in Dar es Salaam, while hundreds of exiles sheltered temporarily or permanently at Mazimbu where the ANC built a school for students who had fled South Africa after the 1976 uprising in Soweto. Later Lusaka in Zambia became the ANC headquarters and a school for students from Mozambique.

The Rift — The Exile Experience of South Africans, from Edward Said. Here she describes how she researched her book and gives us a portrait of the South African exile experience.

The biggest concentrations of exiles were in Mozambique (from which they were ousted by the Nkomati Accord). The ANC in exile for 30 years, lived in the countries of their host countries. And if memory is the continuity principle for persons, then history is the continuity principle for nations. I wanted to reclaim the right of the exiles to a place in South African history, a right they themselves had earned by their rejection of and resistance to the lives of apartheid; and in the case of white exiles, their rejection of the social values of their class and race. ‘Police files,’ wrote Kundera, ‘are our only claim to immortality.’ I would interview exiles so that they could claim an immortality for themselves.

The exact number of our exiles was not known, but was estimated to be around 60,000 — it was impossible to assess with any accuracy. And often the place of origin of the people who emigrated was blurred. They had left by different routes, crossing borders; they had entered countries without passports or papers; or sometimes had left with exit permits, which denied them the right to return to their own country.

When James Madhlope Phillips died, I knew I had to write about exiles. Like so many others, he left South Africa alone, but unlike many others he sent for his family and rebuilt it in exile. He and his wife Maud managed to buy a terraced house in London. They took in lodgers, South Africans who like themselves had come into exile. Most of the ANC leaders who came to London found their first home with Maud and James: Duma Nokwe, J.B. Marks, Robbie Resha, and many others. Oliver Tambo, who led the ANC in exile for 30 years, lived there with his family, until they could find a place of their own.

James had a wonderful resonant bass voice. All of us in the liberation movement loved to hear him sing. He trained choirs in Wales, the United States, Holland and Germany to sing South African freedom songs. His voice was as deep and as powerful as Paul Robeson’s. He was our Robeson.

James Phillips was, like all the exiles who left South Africa between the late 1950s and the 1990s, removed from his history. The continuity of his and their lives had been broken; they had left the history of their own country, but they did not become part of the history of their host countries. And if memory is the continuity principle for persons, then history is the continuity principle for nations. I wanted to reclaim the right of the exiles to a place in South African history, a right they themselves had earned by their rejection of and resistance to the lives of apartheid; and in the case of white exiles, their rejection of the social values of their class and race. ‘Police files,’ wrote Kundera, ‘are our only claim to immortality.’ I would interview exiles so that they could claim an immortality for themselves.

The exact number of our exiles was not known, but was estimated to be around 60,000 — it was impossible to assess with any accuracy. And often the place of origin of the people who emigrated was blurred. They had left by different routes, crossing borders; they had entered countries without passports or papers; or sometimes had left with exit permits, which denied them the right to return to their own country.

SOUTHERN AFRICAN REVIEW OF BOOKS July/August 1993
to integrate, because I knew that if I integrate it’s going to be difficult to uproot and go back,' Even so, he started as a brick-layer and ended as a civil engineer. His wife, Carin, went to school and from school through war-torn Beirut, Gloria Nkadimeng, separated from her home and mother when she was 13. She ended up in Cuba, an island in Cuba. Terry Bell and his wife taught in New Zealand. A small colony ended in Arhus, halfway up the coast of Jutland, where the Beck family — Godfrey Beck, before he died, persuaded that they would be safer if her parents with eleven children — were taken by the Danish refugee organisation when they were threatened with deportation back to South Africa from Botswana. And it was from Arhus that Godfrey Beck, before he died, persuaded the Danish parliament to adopt the first resolution boycotting South African goods.

The strangeness sometimes almost reality — of the exiles’ experiences was often locked within themselves and difficult to release. After relating their story, some would say, 'I’ve never spoken about that before', There were things too painful for them to express, things that scared them for the safety of those left behind, and even fear of what could happen to them in exile — the death squads reached to Eurovision and the Levant, and up from Swaziland by South African commandos and taken on a gruesome, bizarre, nightmare journey in a van with a dead man; left suffering for months in a pointless and unexplained detention; then warned on her release never to tell anyone what had happened. She was so fearful for her children that she told no one, until when she was in exile in Canada she was persuaded that they would be safer if her story were told.

Two related interviews epitomised the drama and diversity of the exiles’ lives. In Canada I interviewed Joyce Dipaule through her husband, Rola, because a stroke had robbed her of the power of speech. In Botswana she had been targeted by a South African political activist; she was stoned in the neck but failed to kill her. In Britain I interviewed Dirk Coetzee, the head of that death squad who had crossed the border before the attack on the apartheid assassin Joyce and Rola. Later Dirk had defected, and was now also an exile. The two stories of that night side by side:

The South African death squads and commandos operated with arrogant disregard for frontiers in Lesotho, Swaziland, Botswana and in Zambia and Mozambique. There were 11,500 South Africans who had sought refuge in Lesotho, a tiny country of 1.3 million people. In December 1982 South African commandos surged through the sleeping streets of Maseru and assassinated 42 people, 30 South Africans and 12 Basotho. Ma-Mia, whose husband, daughter and son were murdered that night, recounts how she wished they had killed her too; but she survived to care for her daughter’s child and other children as a matron in Mazimba. Steve Batji who washed the bodies of murdered comrades on the mortuary slab told me that the funeral tells how for weeks after he could not eat meat. Bunse Sexwale lay in a ditch with her daughters, watching her house being bombed and burned. Two weeks after I had interviewed Father Eapley in Zimbabwe, he suffered horrific injuries from a letter bomb, losing both hands, and it took him six months to move on, scattered into other countries.

A raid in Botswana in 1986 killed 12, including a talented artist; the raiders shot over and over into a pile of bodies, killing still them. Henrietta Infante and her raid also destroyed a flourishing experiment in arts organisation, the Medu Arts Ensemble, an association set up by the exiles embracing theatre, music, poetry, the graphic arts, and through its activities joined the exiles with Botswana citizens. After the raid the exiles vowed not to move on, scattered into other countries.

Zambia, too, was an unsafe haven, but the exile experience in places like assimilation. Being in a black majority further north in Africa or in Europe and America. For all the difficulties of life in Lusaka the South Africans were a large community still within the ambience of Southern Africa. While some married Zambians, there was never any attempt to adjust to the life and culture of another country. In these border areas it was not so much strangers in a strange country, but part of a cohesive community in which their own customs and language and culture were maintained, and held together by their organised opposition to apartheid.

Further north, the strangeness began to grow. In many ways it was hard for black South Africans to adjust to living in black countries — Nigeria, Tanzania, Ghana, Botswana. How it was for them in Europe. In Europe they knew, and were so often reminded, that they did not belong, and did not try to assimilate. Being in a black majority country, on the other hand, deceived them into thinking that they shared a common culture or outlook. They found this was not so. The experience was for them in Europe, while what Mazimba found this was not so. The experience was for them in Europe, while what Mazimba was for them in Europe, while what Mazimba was for them in Europe, while what Mazimba was for them in Europe, while what Mazimba was for them in Europe, while what Mazimba was for them in Europe, while what Mazimba was for them in Europe, while what Mazimba was for them in Europe, while what Mazimba was for them in Europe, while what Mazimba was for them in Europe.

In the tradition of African families, the children were loved and cared for. But the sorrows of that separation were never overcome. The mothers live forever with the pains of parting, the regrets; the children with the feeling that — whatever the reason — they were abandoned.

Exile forced the women to discard their accustomed roles, to assume the responsibility of making their own lives: they had to do the things that had not been done when they were at home. They had to remake themselves, become independent, take decisions that once they had left to others. The men were more likely to be the political activists, training in Angola or posted to distant places, leaving wives charged with the emotional care of bringing up their families. The women emerge with an underlying strength that enables them to handle the stresses of marriage. Men who already had families when they left, could leave — as so many of them did — without telling their wives; and they would not even mention that they had left a wife and children unless I asked them. When they left, they closed the door behind them and went out into the world, to begin new lives. The women, even those without children, were revered from a family support system that had been the essential core of their lives, the guardians of continuity that gave coherence to the incoherence of lives in exile.

The children are the uninformed victims of their parents exile, even those brought into exile as babies, even those born in exile. Left or taken, the children bear burdens of resentment that are difficult to resolve. In the Western world they struggled with the split between home and society; outside the home they intrigue to be the same as, accepted by, their peer group in school in the country where they now lived; and returning to that other country, left physically but always there in their parents’ talk, friends, social customs. Some black children showed a stronger sense of their own identity, perhaps, by skin colour, they knew they did not belong and did not seek to integrate. Only when they return to South Africa do they return to the country however different they have become from those at home, and impossible it is ever again to slot completely into the society their parents left.
In home sickness you must keep moving — it is the only disease that does not require rest,” wrote H. de Vere Somers in his study of the nomads of many of the exiles’ lives was the extent to which they kept moving from country to country. There were always, of course, legitimate reasons for the chance of furthering their education, the need to accept a job somewhere else; or sometimes the inability to obtain a visa. But underlying it was the feeling of not belonging, wherever they were. They became contemporary nomads.

Mac Carim, who worked in 33 different countries for Pepsi Cola, said: “We’ve never been able to settle. We’re always temporary wherever we go.”

In London, Brighton, Nigeria, Mozambique, Tanzania. Es’kia Mphahlele, denied of the right to teach in his own country, taught in Nigeria for 4 years; went to Paris and worked there for 2 years; then went to Nairobi to teach. Left there for Zambia; then, in pursuit of furthering his education and accepting new jobs, lived and worked in the United Kingdom, Canada, the Scandinavian Union, South Africa, Namibia before he could obtain the right to return as a South African and be granted citizenship in his own country. He himself felt he had gained much from his time in exile, but it cost him his children, four sons and a daughter, who grew up outside South Africa. The sons will not return. The daughter has not decided.

Eve and Tony Hall, when they returned to South Africa 12 years ago, before coming back after a quarter of a century in exile, reconed: total house moves, 23 times in 26 years; total moves from one country to another, 12 or 15 times in 26 years... complete gypsies. Their nomadic life took them to countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Europe, America. So it went on, and you thought how much of something you have, you don’t belong and you’re even a little ashamed to have a slightly proprietor feeling. Because you don’t own it at all.

The exiles adapted to the long dark days, the cold and the stiff formalities of Sweden, shared in and learned from the generous educational and welfare advantages of Denmark; adjusted to the stasis of an eternal present, among people with whom they had no shared experience of the past, and with whom they did not wish to share their future. The nest where; the future would be elsewhere.

“You are engaged with an elsewhere that cannot be reached; isn’t it the defining characteristic of exile?” (Brecht.)

Exiles in Britain became the moti­pals of an exceptional anti-apartheid movement; spread to other countries, and played a vital role in educating the world to the meaning of apartheid, in organising sports, cultural and consumer boycotts and sanctions, and ultimately in isolat­ting South Africa and bringing pressure forces back from outside as well as from within.

The story is quite remarkable. The British Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) grew from the activities of a small group of students who had come to Britain to study. When Oliver Tambo was sent by the ANC in anticipation of its banishing to establish a base outside the country, he was unknown, unregarded, unreceived. He and a handful of exiles battled against total indifference to the meaning of apartheid. At the time, the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 (67 killed, 187 injured) the British Prime Minister, Macmillan, warned col­umbers to avoid lending support to the movement. The exiles put down roots. You have to live somewhere, find work, communicate; your children have to go to school, have friends. You have to earn a living; a new, a separate, but a present life. In learning to adapt, inevitably you must become, at least in part, attached to the society in which you have chosen to live, to your intentions and desires. ‘It wasn’t meant to be exile,’ said Hugh Masekela.

I learned a great deal from interview­ing so many people. I learned about the important of ritual, something which had no meaning in the past. The deepest hurt, the most pro­found sorrow was felt by those who were unable to take part in the rituals of marriage and death to the fam­iies that they had left behind. Speaking of the death of her mother, an exile in Canada, felt all Africans were regarded as being from a backward, uncultured continent. After speaking at a meeting, a woman came up and pointed out, adding, ‘And good grammar, too’.

Katheko speaks six languages. Even African-Americans tended to regard Africans as backwatered; Nigerians looked down on South Africans for not having overthrown apartheid.

For three decades apartheid South Africa sent into jail, to exile and often to death its most gifted, resolute and creative citizens. The loss of those others. They have made a new history for themselves.

The exiles adapted to the long dark days, the cold and the stiff formalities of Sweden, shared in and learned from the generous educational and welfare advantages of Denmark; adjusted to the divisiveness of the Netherlands, to the British evasive suspicion of strangers, to the rigid protocol of the German; mastered the obscure languages of eastern Europe; observed, but did not approve of, the cult of individualism and group polarisation. They had made a new history for themselves.

The greatest of all the exiles, the exiles who never returned, were the Asylum seekers. It is not they who have been in the right, but they who have been in the wrong.

The exiles adapted to the long dark days, the cold and the stiff formalities of Sweden, shared in and learned from the generous educational and welfare advantages of Denmark; adjusted to the divisiveness of the Netherlands, to the British evasive suspicion of strangers, to the rigid protocol of the German; mastered the obscure languages of eastern Europe; observed, but did not approve of, the cult of individualism and group polarisation. They had made a new history for themselves.

For three decades apartheid South Africa sent into jail, to exile and often to death its most gifted, resolute and creative citizens. The loss of those others. They have made a new history for themselves.
A few years ago Albie Sachs popularised a few sentences taken from Njabulo Ndebele’s Sol Plaatje Memorial Lecture of 1984: ‘Revolutionaries are not always busy fighting. They are also busy loving, jilting each other, being envious of each other’. Ndebele’s thinking continues to fuel the debates around cultural policy with ideas first formulated ten years ago. The inherent authority of that thinking became apparent to me for the first time at the Jubilee Conference of the English Academy of South Africa in 1986, when Ndebele’s keynote address, ‘The English Language and Social Change in South Africa’, sustained and enriched the debate in every discussion group in which I took part. His collected essays, Rediscovery of the Ordinary, the Conformity, confirm the impression the individual essays had already made on me: he is one of the most potent thinkers in the arena of cultural politics in South Africa.

He has also played a leading role in many of the cultural bodies that have been formed over recent years. Writer’s organisations and cultural initiatives are inherently fragile, given the very sensitive egos of artists. His history of ‘The Writers’ Movement in South Africa’, included in this volume, testifies to the many initiatives in the past being abandoned or breaking up over matters of principle or in the clash of incompatible personalities. Ndebele has been a frequent participant in the COSAW every year since its foundation in 1987 and it is his quiet authority and incisive thinking that has controlled towards saving this initiative from going the way of its predecessors. Universities vie for his services; so do the National Arts Initiative and the newly elected Board of the South African Broadcasting Corporation. It comes as no surprise that F.W. de Klerk refused to have him as the chairperson of the latter.

The recent attack on Ndebele by Mewa Ramgobin of the ANC on the TV program Agenda needs to be placed in this context as well. A re-reading of Ndebele’s essays suggests that there are deep-lying differences in the ranks of what seems to be a homogeneous cultural movement. The dispute over full or observer status for the ANC’s Department of Arts and Culture at the National Arts Initiative is both a dispute over control of an organ of civil society which deliberately styled itself as non-sectarian, and a dispute over control of the field of arts and culture. The ANC claims to be the representative of the majority of the inhabitants of this country and maintains that its cultural policy has as its main objective ‘the cultural liberation of the African people of South Africa’ (Weekly Mail, May 28, 1993); the National Arts Initiative is apparent and often disregarded existence of it in their own countries. They leave behind on streets and squares and buildings in countries north and south, the name of Mandela, who broke through the silent incarceration of a cell on wind swept Robben Island to become the world’s most famous political prisoner; and thus to symbolise the struggle for human rights everywhere and to inspire others.

A few years ago Albie Sachs popularised a few sentences taken from Njabulo Ndebele’s Sol Plaatje Memorial Lecture of 1984: ‘Revolutionaries are not always busy fighting. They are also busy loving, jilting each other, being envious of each other’. Ndebele’s thinking continues to fuel the debates around cultural policy with ideas first formulated ten years ago. The inherent authority of that thinking became apparent to me for the first time at the Jubilee Conference of the English Academy of South Africa in 1986, when Ndebele’s keynote address, ‘The English Language and Social Change in South Africa’, sustained and enriched the debate in every discussion group in which I took part. His collected essays, Rediscovery of the Ordinary, the Conformity, confirm the impression the individual essays had already made on me: he is one of the most potent thinkers in the arena of cultural politics in South Africa.

He has also played a leading role in many of the cultural bodies that have been formed over recent years. Writer’s organisations and cultural initiatives are inherently fragile, given the very sensitive egos of artists. His history of ‘The Writers’ Movement in South Africa’, included in this volume, testifies to the many initiatives in the past being abandoned or breaking up over matters of principle or in the clash of incompatible personalities. Ndebele has been a frequent participant in the COSAW every year since its foundation in 1987 and it is his quiet authority and incisive thinking that has controlled towards saving this initiative from going the way of its predecessors. Universities vie for his services; so do the National Arts Initiative and the newly elected Board of the South African Broadcasting Corporation. It comes as no surprise that F.W. de Klerk refused to have him as the chairperson of the latter.

The recent attack on Ndebele by Mewa Ramgobin of the ANC on the TV program Agenda needs to be placed in this context as well. A re-reading of Ndebele’s essays suggests that there are deep-lying differences in the ranks of what seems to be a homogeneous cultural movement. The dispute over full or observer status for the ANC’s Department of Arts and Culture at the National Arts Initiative is both a dispute over control of an organ of civil society which deliberately styled itself as non-sectarian, and a dispute over control of the field of arts and culture. The ANC claims to be the representative of the majority of the inhabitants of this country and maintains that its cultural policy has as its main objective ‘the cultural liberation of the African people of South Africa’ (Weekly Mail, May 28, 1993); the National Arts Initiative is apparent and often disregarded existence of it in their own countries. They leave behind on streets and squares and buildings in countries north and south, the name of Mandela, who broke through the silent incarceration of a cell on wind swept Robben Island to become the world’s most famous political prisoner; and thus to symbolise the struggle for human rights everywhere and to inspire others.

Peter Horn takes a look at Njabulo Ndebele’s contribution to current cultural policy debates through an examination of his collected essays

Rediscovery of the Ordinary. Essays on South African Literature and Culture by Njabulo Ndebele


There is, however, an aspect to the situation which has not yet been noted in the debate. Even if the ANC wanted to — and there is no reason to believe that it wants to — it could not extricate itself from the expectations of grass-roots politics. The ANC is at the moment caught in a situation where its grass-roots supporters are as much a hindrance as a necessary support for its politics. To understand that a party in power, or striving to come to power, is subject to certain pressures to behave in certain ways is taking a pragmatic view of what politics and politicians are about.

I understand that all those who are in power have an interest in making sure that nobody else speaks with the authority of power; but at the same time they have an interest in those who have an independent authority speaking in favour of those in power. Religious leaders, academics, writers and artists find themselves viewed with suspicion if they criticise the current government or governing party or the government in waiting, but welcomed if they support it. The powerful try to square the circle by creating a class of intellectuals who, while seeming to speak independently, in reality speak for the party. Thus, the ANC should enshrine the principle of artistic freedom’ (Serote, Weekly Mail, May, 1993), seems to be seen as useful and should be extended to all artists. That ventures like the Culture and Development Conference were an attempt to assert ANC control, and an attempt to commit art workers to an active role in the service of an election. Matshoba’s statement ‘that, with apartheid still firmly in place, it is still too premature to disassociate the arts and culture from the liberation struggle’ (Weekly Mail, May 28, 1993) seems to point in this direction, effectively denying that the ANC has contributed to the continued liberation struggle without being controlled by the Department of Arts and Culture.

Instead of facing up to the various causes, but what makes them suspicious in the eyes of the powerful and the party adherents is their ability to think independently and to criticise the current party line. The artist, writes Ndebele, ‘although desiring action, often with as much passion as the politician, can never be entirely free from the rules of irony. Irony is the literary manifestation of contradiction’ (p. 67) and ‘the truth of literature is to allow readers to formulate insights independently’ (p. 142). Because of that ability to think critically and to make others think critically, artists are constantly denounced as ‘vociferating’ and ‘uncertain’, ‘traitors’ and ‘not seriously committed’ to the struggle’. The politician, desiring action, desiring to seize state power, has to suppress any “denying the existing contradiction in his own actions and statements. And yet the suppression of such contradictions makes our thinking and planning shallower and ineffective: ‘If we want to struggle towards a genuinely democratic future, then we must
be prepared to subject everything to rigorous intellectual scrutiny followed by open and fearless discussion' (p. 35). It is precisely this 'everything' which the politician finds threatening to his efforts to contain and control. Anti-intellectualism, as an attempt to inhibit this debate, is anti-democratic. 

Relevant to the politician's independence of mind, their commitment to his efforts to contain and control. The evidence of oppression, of the authority they have acquired in the eyes of the public as serious and legitimate rests on the organised masses they 'represent'. Both groups are constantly uncertain of the support of either their readers or their followers. Those who have been persuaded to think or vote in one way can be persuaded to think and vote in another. For Ndebele 'rediscovering the ordinary' does not mean abandoning the struggle for ideological clarity on the matter of the oppression depicted by Durant Sihlali on the front cover of his book. On the contrary, it means deepening the intellectual tools of the 'spectacular' in the same way that the oppressed cannot develop a creative analytical approach to their predicament. This mode of perception, the 'spectacular' can become an instrument of oppression it sought to understand and undermine. The expression of oppression, Ndebele argues, is all around us to see, 'but what is so easy to understand is how that oppression actually affects the oppressed' (p. 82).

Ndebele has attempted to delineate the differences between the approach of the two groups as one between the 'spectacular' and the 'ordinary' (p. 50). The propagandist is forced to see things 'in terms of a total polarity of the problems' (p. 58); you are either supporting a party or you are not, your own party is right and the others are wrong. Those writers, therefore, who perform the function of the political propagandist while pretending to be writers tend towards the 'spectacular'; the others are the ones who 'rediscover the ordinary'. The propagandists perform the perfectly legitimate function of identifying and highlighting oppression, of appealing to the moral sense of right-thinking citizens or the commitment of publicists to his efforts to contain and control. It is in this sense that the artist has to grapple with 'the impossibly clearcut demarcation in a power structure, but because of the authority they have acquired in the eyes of the public as serious and independent thinkers. Politicians need the persuasive power of these 'intellectuals'. Yet at the same time they fear the possibility of being undermined by the others. Of course, leaders of political parties are intellectuals — people who use their intellect to control the political environment. But their legitimacy in the end does not rest solely on what they have thought and written or on the diffuse and unorganised group of readers and followers. Those who have been persuaded to think or vote in one way can be persuaded to think and vote in another. The strength of the appeal of the process for both groups is devastating. And this is where egos come in: they lose all of the advantages and privileges of practical or cultural leadership. The temptation to gloss over the difference between the interests of intellectuals and the interests of the masses is great, or as Ndebele formulates it: 'Is it not possible that in the history of the struggle the leadership class has ascribed to the masses interests that were not the interests of the masses?' (p. 82).

In the first four essays of the book, which explore the shift from 'protest poetry' to a new kind of writing in the Seventies and Eighties, it is because of this that Ndebele uses the term 'the spectacular' as against 'the ordinary'. The 'spectacular' in his analysis, is the term for the frozen confrontation of the oppressor and the oppressed, the image of the active and violent state against the passive victim frozen in every way as we if we ask what constitutes by the media as the unanalysed emblem of South African reality. Yet art has never been able to do without the 'spectacular' or 'unbelievable' as a social process in a dramatic image of tremendous explanatory value. Popular literature, in particular, has always understood the 'spectacular' — one of the most powerful weapons of the white的学习, the ghost in Hamlet, where the evil of the times is exposed in grand scenes. For example, 'Thieves of Cruelty' feeds on the 'spectacular' as much as the great Greek tragedies. Ndebele, of course, knows this: 'we can find the culture of the oppositional in subversive ways, in free-style township dance and even in football, where spectacular display of individual talent is often more memorable, and more enjoyable, and even more desirable than the final score' (p. 44). The refined nineteenth-century theatre and novel of the European bourgeoisie developed the taste for the nuances of the interior life. And it is precisely against this over-refinement that a great number of the artists of the twentieth century, modern and post-modern, have revolted. What Ndebele is really concerned with is not the 'spectacular' as such, but the 'spectacular' as a process and a political detail, and part of the oppressed in a literature which has frozen the struggle in an ever recurring tableau. It is when the 'spectacular' elides this process that it stultifies rather than enlightens. Apparently there is nothing to explain when the majority, standing as a feature of South African oppression is its brazen, exhibitionist openness' (p. 38). The very 'naturalness' and 'reality' of these images is problematic.

This frozen tableau lends itself to the 'marketing' of resistance, which excludes the 'consumers' as equals in the quest for truth (p. 26). Even a politics which sees itself as one of participatory democracy where, however, a mandate from the grass-roots more often than not means the acceptance of the deception is problematic concerning the committed 'consumer' to the citizen as an equal questioning the party line. Ndebele, who argues like Marcuse that the 'need for radical change ... must be rooted in the subjectivity of the individuals themselves', poses a threat to the politician even if he pays lip-service to this dictum. It is, according to Ndebele, the tendency 'either to deviate or to ignore interiority' that constitutes the fundamental weakness of the political propagandist. But let nobody mistake that 'interiority' for the withdrawal from society into an autistic subjectivity which is blind to the world. In fact, it is precisely this 'interiority' is possible or not. In the same way the 'ordinary' is not a return to the gentle canons of nature and democracy that Marcuse has described for South African poetry. It is rather the 'Practice of Everyday Life', as Michel de Certeau has described it, the recognition that each individual is a focus in which the sociality of the world, the placidity of resistance by the citizen as an equal questioning the party line and the mechanics of disguise and conformity to them only in order to evade them, using deviousness, fantasy and laughter; the recognition that the participants of the struggle are not alone in their struggle, but in a personal history ... mere ideas to be marshalled this way or in a moral debate'. Ndebele argues that in this way the historical world becomes the dialectical equivalent of the anonymity to which the oppressive system consigns millions of oppressed Africans.

The 'ordinary' therefore implies that the life of even the most oppressed is not merely passive, but one which, as Baudrillard has said, is a constant active strategy to survive within the oppressive rules, strategies that seem to comply with the rules but in fact subvert them. And it is the most oppressive of conditions, people are always trying and struggling to maintain a semblance of normal social order (p. 53). Then in the world of creativity-outside of the direct control of the oppressive system (p. 81). By depicting the oppressed merely as victims, we deprive them of images of resistance, of images which encourage self-determination rather than other-determination. Such depictions, which are of course the direction of the present regime, may not be altogether unwelcome to some who see themselves as the future government. Images of victims of a brutal apartheid state in the image of cultural heroes who appear Christ-like to 'free' the oppressed. Such images of
building often seems more important than plans to change its substance. But even the control over the building and the apparatus of the opera houses can easily serve the purpose of 'African absorption into another culture' (p. 90), unless we know what to do with that apparatus. In taking over the theatre and opera buildings we are in danger of taking over the standards of that elite culture, and we need to be reminded by Ndebele that 'if we define success ... according to the standards and formulations of the oppressor we have, in a very fundamental manner, become the oppressor' (p. 76).

What needs to be addressed, and what has not been addressed so far, is Ndebele's insight that the masses want to be 'makers of culture in their own right' (p. 33) and that the cultural domain of the future has to be structured in such a way 'so that [they] too can participate in the historical contest of texts for authority' (p. 142). This is not only a question of learning the skills of writing, painting, music and all the other arts; it is a question in the first instance of the socially organised planning of their communities and of society, the very framework within which all expressions of culture are possible. We need to remember Ndebele's statement that 'the oppressed were effectively denied the opportunity and the sovereign right and experience to create a complex human civilisation' (p. 120f.). It is this exclusion from decisions which denies all culture. Just as 'art should properly speaking be regarded as an extension of the democratic process' (p. 130) and just as 'there can be no democratic society in a world that is progressively institutionalised of cultural practice, in all its forms' (p. 130), so there can be no art for all except in a democratic society where the very grass-roots of the society are able to determine their culture in such a way that 'the social imagination of the oppressed can be extended considerably and made ready in concrete terms to deal with the demands of a complex future' (p. 72).

It will not be good enough to have a culture where those who speak are now the leaders of the ANC instead of the leaders of the National Party. It is not good enough to have a new master discourse controlled by the ANC's Department of Arts and Culture, even if it speaks in the name of the masses, as it undoubtedly should do. When it comes to culture, the masses do not need or want anybody to speak for them. They will want to shape their texts themselves: 'For this reason, therefore', writes Ndebele, 'the oppressed of South Africa will want to re-enter the contest for power in history with both their minds and their hands. They will accept no assurances that the book and the doing have been done for them. They will want nothing less than the writing of their own texts' (p. 141).

Peter Horn is Professor of German at UCT.

Ode to a Pilgrimage
(For Keorapetse Kgositile)
by Lance Nawa

Just the other day
I almost accused you of being vulgar
when you uttered some phrase in Setswana which, when translated into the Queen's language, would refer to her royal private parts.

Little did I know
that you were simply trying to direct my attention to the grey rings around the pupils of your eyes which seemed to suggest that

a flower, as a symbol of love in her empire, could represent death in our continent; that white is at times a colour of widowhood in the land of Ghandi

These circles, the mirror of your soul, are indeed cycles of your pilgrimage in this dangerous present, this world we live in.

They clearly depict your movements around the globe. Within them is a priest in a wardance: evoking images of exploding landscapes, quicksands and leeches - but most of all, arum-lilies growing in mud when the clouds clear...

Some fellow dancers joined the quest with the obsession of holding on to the past. Thus they danced and tripped over their heels like dogs chasing their tails. Others, like balloons inflated with blind fury and self-aggrandisement, grew bigger and bigger until they popped into oblivion

Yet you trudged on with your tiny footsteps, side-stepping landmines and graves scrambling for corpses. In particular, one in Mozambique whose tombstone, as bra Chris graffiti, was hopelessly pre-empting your premature meeting with the creator

But you moved the full circle to a point where you began the journey and 'knew the place for the first time...' Here are streets that could never claim you again as much as you them. It is here where your drunken vomit dumped your betrayal and loneliness behind your words at a certain conference

And I
your starry-eyed protégé, was summoned to transcend human weakness and pathetic sight by sorting out nourishing metaphors from what you had ploughed back into the earth and join the circles cycles circles cycles cycles cycles... the never-ending formations presenting a pilgrimage into African kraals

Through these, I see the pebbles of diaspora raising their chins higher than the towering sea waves. In you they appear first-hand like a man I once met on the shores of Chicago (a point you're now and then drawn back to) muttering to a shoal of fish he had just hooked out: 'Africa can sure provide for her children...'

Look no further than your brow, Thswene e e lebha...
For Africa is right here
For you
For all of us
Collection Number: A3299
Collection Name: Hilda and Rusty BERNSTEIN Papers, 1931-2006

PUBLISHER:

Publisher: Historical Papers Research Archive
Collection Funder: Bernstein family
Location: Johannesburg
©2015

LEGAL NOTICES:

Copyright Notice: All materials on the Historical Papers website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Disclaimer and Terms of Use: Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

People using these records relating to the archives of Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, are reminded that such records sometimes contain material which is uncorroborated, inaccurate, distorted or untrue. While these digital records are true facsimiles of paper documents and the information contained herein is obtained from sources believed to be accurate and reliable, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand has not independently verified their content. Consequently, the University is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the website or any related information on third party websites accessible from this website.

This document is part of the Hilda and Rusty Bernstein Papers, held at the Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.