The subsequent narrative of the flight across the Botswana border must surely be a prototype for many subsequent descriptions of comparable episodes which though no less true are not somehow as believable as this one. The writing is economical and yet tells so much about the mixture of sickening fear, social dislocation, geographical disorientation, and occasional baths which accompany the Berksteins on their lonely exodus. They lose their way, searching for the border fence, Hilda's feet hurt, they are given porridge and water at an impoverished Sechuana health centre, and finally travel to their first haven in a ramshackle cart drawn by two tired horses. The people are kind enough, but listless, they inhabit a different world with their own problems of a different order of magnitude. The Berksteins arrive in Lobutu, 'two streets that meet to form a T', small, dusty and parochial, but nevertheless the spying capital of South Africa, inhabited by incompetent colonial buffoons, spiky-legged gym-slippered school-children, intimidated shopkeepers, and South African police in very plain clothes.

Suddenly we move from the territory of Nadine Gordimer's July's People to the flyblown scenarios of Graham Greene's third world tragicomedies. Once again, the Berksteins are members of a community, some of whose members are portrayed in richly detailed cameos. I had forgotten, from my reading of the first edition, Bernstein's sketch of Fish Keitsing, the Robin Hood of Newcastle, and making his acquaintance again would, by itself, have made it worth re-reading The World That Was Ours. Maybe it needed a novelist's imagination to capture Mr Keitsing properly, for historians have paid him only cursory attention. But Hilda Bernstein's book is exact, though it reads like a very good one; the people and the place exist — the text is the product of acute observation, though as in fiction the images and the atmosphere are chosen with calculated precision.

The publication of a new and revised edition of The World That Was Ours is a welcome event. I am not sure that the additions have substantially improved the text and I remember more autobiographical detail in the original which I think should have been retained. But these are minor reservations. The events which she describes have become an international legend. Legends are all too often proved by gods and supermen. Hilda Bernstein's book reduces the legacies of her resolutions and restores it to a sense of tragedy. As a consequence the leading characters once again become capable of moving us with their frailties and strengths.

Tom Lodge is a staff associate at the Social Science Research Council in New York.

An Interview with Miriam Tlali

Cecily Lockett spoke to Miriam Tlali, author of the novels Muriel at Metropolitan and Amandla, in Johannesburg on 4 September 1988. A new collection of short stories entitled Soweto Stories was published by Pandora Press in March this year — in South Africa it is called Footsteps in the Quag (David Philip)

You were the first black woman to publish a novel in South Africa, and you are, as far as I know, you are still the only black woman novelist in South Africa. (Posing the question in this way, of course, excludes black writers like Benjamine Japha, Ed.) How do you account for this? Why are there no other black women writing? A novel is something you have to reflect on; you have to create it, you have to have characters, interplay of characters, it has to reflect what goes on in your society, and so on. For a black woman I don't think the wages are very easy, but they have complete pride inside, which is something that I strive very much to get. You have to analyse situations, and all that needs peace of mind and time. It needs a long time and you have to think about it. And you have to dream about it and black women do not have time to dream.

What about some of the social and economic obstacles that you have to overcome in order to be a writer? Social obstacles are always linked to political and economic obstacles. You have to have material, you have to have typewriters, you have to have a lot. That always has to have a lot of time — not that I've had a lot of time myself, or that I've read so much. When I wrote my first novel, Muriel at Metropolitan for instance, I had not read much. I had only read a bit when I was doing my B. A. at Wits and even that was interrupted by my lack of money and the political set-up, which made it impossible for me to do what my mother wanted me to do. So you see, all this is always linked to the political happenings in this country. Now, some of the obstacles I encountered: I finished writing the first novel, Muriel, in 1969, but it was only published in 1975, and even then too, very much expurgated. A lot of material was removed from it to make it acceptable to the white reader.

By whom? By Ravan Press. Very little editing was done. It was presented the way I had written it, but the thing is, they just expurgated a lot of material from it, which would then not be acceptable. So the first version — the South African version — does not have all the right terms, the originality, that I had in my manuscript. Only later on did Longman come forward to ask for the manuscript to publish it abroad — with a lot of errors in it, I'm afraid.

So are you happier with the Longman version or the Ravan Press version? Yes, certainly I am — except for the errors that I'm talking about, which are many, some of them very jarring. But I am happy with it because that is how I had written the book.

Although you are the only black woman novelist, I know of many black women who are involved in organizations with cultural sections where, as cultural workers, they produce performance pieces and drama. I'm thinking of the Costaia poet, Ntie Maligne. Do you know her work?

No, I haven't had time to go to these places. The problem is always a financial one. A lot of the places I'd like to see I just read about in the papers, and that's as far as it goes. Most of the time I do not have the money, and some of those which appear in town are a bit awkward because then I have to drive back or get a lift back into Soweto, and it's very awkward for a black woman. And I still have my responsibilities at home, as a housewife.

How do you see your work, then, in comparison with this kind of performance work which is being done? How do you relate to these women, since you write novels and they perform?

You know, it's just that I'm inclined to deal with material that is much more time consuming — longer, like a novel. But I would very much like to write plays. I have written two plays already. One of them has been featured abroad, and translated into Dutch, but it has never been shown in this country. But I'm hoping it will be. So I'm a plays and I think plays are very important and very necessary for our readers because, as I said, most black people, especially women, do not have the opportunity to sing and dance, and in making music reflect their lives. And this appeals much more to them. You'd have to be a bit intellectual to be able to appreciate some books which are written, but you don't have to be with that kind of presentation or dramatization.

I'd like to change the subject a bit and talk about women's writing. Your first book, Muriel at Metropolitan, and your most recent book, Amandla, are both about the experiences of black women in the South African context. In fact on the cover of Mihloli you point to the subjects of black women's lives — when you quote your grandmother: "to say woman is to say pot; to say woman is to say broom". Would you call yourself a feminist writer?

Well, ja, I would call myself that, but not in the narrow, Western kind of way of speaking about a feminist. Black women are very much conscious of the fact that they are in fact the very people to make the home and very little credit is given to their efforts — which are so much crucial to the running of the home and the society. And I think the South African black women are very strong. I, for one, have had a very strong grandmother, and then my own mother, and I don't think this was accidental. For instance, we spoke about our societies and about women's contribution to them, about our own backgrounds, with writers like Flora Ngwazine and your own, to say you are putting your own backgrounds, with writers like Flora Ngwazine and your own, to say you are putting your own background. And the same applies to these women, who are involved in organizations with cultural sections where, as cultural workers, they produce performance pieces and drama. I'm thinking of the Costaia poet, Ntie Maligne. Do you know her work?

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So you feel there's space for the kind of performance artists do — involving the audience.

Yes. Like when we went to Cape Town, for instance, we had people like James Chirwa and others reciting their poetry on stage, and having the audience involved, like I say, with the artist and appreciating the work.

Do you think art is important for political ends?

Oh yes. The people are art-orientated. They are people of action, people who believe in singing and dancing, in making music reflect their lives. And this appeals much more to them. You'd have to be a bit intellectual to be able to appreciate some books which are written, but you don't have to be with that kind of presentation or dramatization.

I would agree with that. 100 per cent. I remember the very differences that you are talking about came out loud and clear in the recent Congress and Book Fair we had held in Toronto. It has described now have become an international legend. Legends are all too often proved by gods and supermen. Hilda Bernstein's book reduces the legacies of her resolutions and restores it to a sense of tragedy. As a consequence the leading characters once again become capable of moving us with their frailties and strengths.

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mother is something which can be over­
looked. What makes them later try to get
out of that hold that their mother has over
them, the power, the overwhelming power
that the mother has over her off­

You don’t think it’s also a political thing, a blend of those two, or is it
in this country that they feel they have
to vindicate themselves by having power
over women?

Yes, partly. But you look at men in gen­
eral, even the white ones: why do they
in this country that they feel they have
something, that black men are so powerless
in this country that they feel they have
something which can be over­

You must be very proud of your work,
especially Amandla because there you have
something which is by a black woman that can stand next to Serote’s
To Every Birth its Blood, Sepamla’s A

Yes, I am very proud of this. I didn’t
think when I wrote it that it would have
that kind of impact. It took a lot of pain
to write it, but there was something driv­
ing me. I had to present things very
much as they are in reality, I tried to do
that, although it’s all fiction.

I’ve also noticed, although you say it’s
’’fiction’’, there’s a strong graphi­

tical element in your work. Do you
always draw on your own experiences
when you write or create characters, or
did you have a particular motivation?

I do both, yes. I use my imagination a lot
— like when I wrote Amandla. I use my
imagination, but it’s always stemmed
from the black community. People that took part in
were very much involved in the riot­

We were some of the victims of it. I’ve had many rela­
tions with friends in the town­

and in the hospitals, and so on. And the
funerals and all that. I was reliving and
reflecting also the society as a whole. People are always in­
to do this and tell me about their stories. They
were aware that I was writing. There are others who even said to me, “Oh, my

I’d like to talk about the characters in
your books. There has been a sugges­
tion that some of your characters are
based on real people in your life.

I know that you have written about a
Jew. People, for example, take exception to your por­
trayal of Jews in Mr Black of Murati
metropolitan. How do you react to such
criticism?

Yes, it’s very interesting. Ja, it’s all
right. I suppose he would feel like

Funnily, not only Lionel: I remember
just after it was published, some Jewish
ladies invited me to their homes. In fact,
I refused at first. I didn’t really want
to go there, interview these people and
all that. I just wanted to sit and read.

I was forced out of my little corner.
They invited me to come to a party, a
small little party which they were having
for me, and they were going to sell my
book the following day at a fair. And
then a woman appeared and said to me,
“How can you write about Jews that
way? How can you make your main
character a Jew?” And I said, “Look,
around, and go to Johannesburg. Go to all
the shops, all the furniture shops. Who
do you think bought the furniture there? It’s Jews. Who go and
create somebody from Mars when we have these people?” The Jews
are very strong economically and

Yes, very much. I’ve tried long long ago,
all these years. I stopped in 1984, when
I went to Holland for a while.

We had a group of women which I called

not think that way? And even the reac­
tion of the people: they are always talk­
ing about the Jews because they are so
very much involved in economic life. They are the ones who really think. So, don’t see anything wrong with that.

So you were actually writing about what
was going on in Soweto, and experienced?

Yes, especially in Muriel. Mr Bloch
changed his name) is still very much
alive. And most of the things that are said
there about him in fact are things that he himself said.

I bet he was surprised to find himself in
a book. Did he ever read it?

No, I don’t think so. I remember at one
time he called a customer back who said,
“You can’t treat me like this, I’m educat­
ed, I’m a B.A.”, and he said “Look, you
know what B.A. means? It means
Bugger All”. He was himself not an edu­
cated person. He doesn’t read, he thinks
it’s silly, a waste of time. You should
just be interested in making money.

Money’s the most important thing.

I know you’ve been quite closely
involved with Staffridit magazine as one of its founders, and Skontas press,
as a member of the board. Do you think
your role as a woman, has been impor­
tant in these ventures?

Yes, I think that it has been very
important. I remember very clearly, because most of the time I was in almost cer­

And I think also they are jealous; there is
some kind of jealousy which the men
have to answer, especially because they
are so powerful, and they realise it.

And I think the men are very much
oppressed by the men, they are
oppressed by the system. The young women
are oppressed by the white women, who still
look upon them as the ‘‘helpers’’. But even
that keeps the black women right down there. So I don’t think we’ll
see very many for quite a long time.

I know in the last couple of years you’ve
been involved overseas quite a lot to talk
about your work. Do you find that
there’s a wider critical acceptance of
the importance of your work overseas
than in South Africa?

Yes, it’s definitely the case. In the whole
of Western Europe where I travelled I
always found that a lot is known about
me and many people have read the
books, and so on. Of course it didn’t sur­
pmise me because my books were banned
here. They are still unavailable up to this
day. I don’t know why Longman haven’t
tried harder to get Murati circulating in
this country. It’s two years since it was
unbanned, but it’s still not in this
country as much as it is circulating abroad.
Even abroad I’ve got areas where they find it difficult to get hold of
my books. But I’m much more known
well, I wouldn’t say that. The black
people, even if they don’t have my book,
they know about me, they’re aware of
my presence — they feel my presence.

But the actual readership, I think, still
very much abroad. Even in this country,
the people who could get my book to read it when it was first
appeared in the white people and the Indians and Colours. It was still too expensive
for black people to buy. They were aware of it, but when some of them tried to go
to CNA to get it, it was never displayed.
They would have struggled to get it even
before it was banned.

Extracted from the National English
Library Magazine (Private Bag 1019
Grahamstown 6140), Interviews Series
No. 4, Between the Lines edited by
Craig Mackenzie and Margery Nancarrow.
The other women interviewed in the book are
Bessie Head, Sheila Roberts and Ellen Kuzwayo.
Clarence-Smith on Mozambique

Dear Editor,

Gervase Clarence-Smith’s review ‘The Reportage of the Mozambican-Civil-War-Revolution’ (Southern African Review of Books, April/May) does a disservice both to scholarship and to the people of Mozambique. In his efforts to set intellectual fashion with a ‘paradigm shift’, Clarence-Smith indiscriminately mingles genuine research results with unsubstantiated speculation. Serious critical research on such issues as the agrarian crisis and the political economy of the post-colonial state should not entail an ostrich-like avoidance of the very real war waged by South African special forces through Mozambique. Clarence-Smith’s stance—and his indifference to factual information about the war—promotes this false dichotomy.

My quarrel is not with the majority of scholars he cites. Such work should be encouraged, and one might cite as well Canadian and Nordic scholars such as Otto Roesch, Morde Bowen and Kenneth Hermee on agrarian issues and Bertil Eriksson on the issue of democracy, as well as the recent reflection by Frelimo leader Oscar Monteiro on the experience of the people’s assemblies (Poder e Democracia, Maputo Assembly, Popular, 1988). One hopes that this research and reflection will continue without conforming to Clarence-Smith’s ideological strait-jacket or fantasies. (For example, he cites Meyns for not advocating that the state simply ‘withdraw from the economy’; see Cahen and Cardoso for suggesting that ‘state farms could be viable [or] play a positive role’. By labelling the ‘choice of Maputo’ as the capital as ‘strange’, he displays a most unhistorical voluntarism about the options confronting Mozambique at independence.)

In the case itself, however, that Clarence-Smith is most misleading. One may legitimately debate to what extent the war, as contrasted with other factors, is responsible for the social crisis in Mozambique. But to insinuate that the war itself is the result of these internal factors, and that Pretoria’s role, falling outside the paradigm, can be considered peripheral, is to substitute an endogenous for evidence.

In his remarks on the war, Clarence-Smith relies on two sources, a short article by Cahen and Pedersen, and scattered comments in several articles by Cahen, Goffray and Pedersen, as responsible scholars, make it clear that their essay is a set of hypotheses based on the study of the social structure of Erati district in Nampula province. They acknowledge that it is also direct evidence on Renamo itself, phrase their hypotheses in the subjunctive even with reference to Erati district itself, and point their possible generalization only to the rest of Nampula province. Clarence-Smith presents their tentative projections as established facts applying to the entire country. Even ignoring the counter example of the Vunduca study by Heimer and da Silva, where ‘the regime remained popular enough ... for the population not to be forced out’, he never raises the issue of how our current Mozambique and four neighbouring countries between January and March 1988, he reported that of the 640 murders of civilians personally witnessed by his informants, they attributed 94% to Renamo, 3% to the government, and only 3% to others. ‘Refugees’ were asked whether they blame bandits and are in terms of the two principal parties to the conflict, perpetrated the acts they witnessed; their responses were emphatically negative.’ (Even plainly the 

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recruited by political appeals or appeals to discontent.

According to Genomy's interviews with volunteers, the 'relationship between Renamo and the population appears to revolve solely around the extraction of resources, strictly by force, with a high tolerance for refusal, and without reciprocation'. This is hardly an atmosphere for voluntary recruitment, whatever the population may think of the government.

Renamo combatants, speaking not only for voluntary recruitment, whatever the considerations by all my informants to be a beginning; abduction of new recruits was considered by virtually all that Renamo can group two or approximately 100 men is so equipped, and with a high radio communications (each company-level unit of integrated into other chapters (which I think we achieved rather better than she does), I had the job of eliminating overlap, so that Weiner's treatment of this issue became implicit rather than explicit.

Incidentally, two of the chapters Elizabeth Schmidt thinks have 'surprising' little direct reference to women's issues, on education and health, had women authors, who, as I recall, were inclined to oppose having a chapter specifically on women that gender issues be integrated into other chapters (which I think we achieved rather better than she does), I had the job of eliminating overlap, so that Weiner's treatment of this issue became implicit rather than explicit.

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Keynote speakers include: the novelist and pro Vice Chancellor of the University of Lesotho, Njabulo Ndebele; the novelist, critic and Professor of Literature at the University of Cape Town, John Coetzee; and the novelist, critic and former Professor of English at the University of Zambia, Lewis Nkosi.
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