

[Although this essay was presented as a lecture at the Center for Black Studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara on April 30, 1990, it was really a product of my West Berlin stay from 1985 to 1989. Henry Nxumalo was the founding member of Drum magazine. He seems to have been intellectually closer to H. I. E. Dhlomo and Peter Abrahams (according to the latter's Return to Egoli [1953]) than to Bloke Modisane and Lewis Nkosi (writers of the literary generation in which he is usually placed). He was a historical figure of historical connections and transitions. The following essay of historical connections exemplifies this particular spirit of Henry Nxumalo.]

Black South African literature from the 'Sophiatown Renaissance' to 'Black Mamba Rising': Transformations and Variations from the 1950s to the 1980s.

by

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The task of historical hermeneutics is to make alien material comprehensible, i.e. material that is remote in time or in social or ethnic origin. In so doing, we do not deny its extrinsic or intrinsic distance from us, but instead make this distance part of the present as opposed to viewing it from a detached historical standpoint. In other words, an aesthetic presence based on such historical insight embraces rather than bypasses an awareness of this otherness or alienness.

-Carl Dahlhaus, "Is history on the decline?," in the Foundations of music history.

In its broad outline it is this: up to now our fiction has been a fiction of witness - doing a useful job in bearing witness to the immense suffering of our people and the sacrifices they have been and are continuing to make in resisting this oppression, but the nature of our crisis as black writers is where to go from here.

-Lewis Nkosi, "South African Literature: Resistance and the Crisis of Representation" (1987)

The literary moment of the 1950's, which has retrospectively been designated as the Sophiatown Renaissance, was a very crucial and equally, a very problematical period in South African literary history. Located as it was between two political conjunctures, the Defiance Campaign of 1952 which facilitated its emergence and the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 which terminated its era by forcing it into exile, it developed cultural coordinates and articulated philosophical positions which found greater resonance and affirmation within an international black culture of our century. The Sophiatown Renaissance,

alternatively characterized also as the Drum writers, because their creative writings and journalistic pieces appeared in the monthly magazine of that name, consisted in the main of the following intellectuals and artists: Can Themba, a superb journalist and short story writer; Lewis Nkosi, a literary critic and great conversationalist; Ezekiel Mphahlele, a literary editor and a brilliant literary scholar; Bloke Modisane, was an actor, autobiographer and critic of jazz; Arthur Maimane, a short story writer and radio broadcaster; Henry Nxumalo, was a news editor and investigative reporter; Peter Magubane, a great photographer; Bob Gosani, was a superb photographer; and others. It was the constellation of these writers which formed one of South Africa's brilliant literary schools.

Although practically all these intellectuals were short story writers, some of whom dabbled in poetry, it is two critical works by Lewis Nkosi and Ezekiel Mphahlele, respectively, *Home and Exile*, and *The African Image*, which are seen today as perhaps representing the summit of this intellectual movement. This retrospective evaluation should not be taken to mean that the other creative endeavors from Sophiatown Renaissance writers were not of original consequence, for the short stories of Can Themba which originally appeared in the Drum magazine, and subsequently assembled together in *The Will To Die*, displayed a style whose originality thereafter was rarely surpassed in our literary history. Equally, Mphahlele's autobiography, *Down Second Avenue*, and Bloke Modisane's autobiography, *Blame Me On History*, were deep encounters with South African history. Though different from each other, one ambiguously celebrating the synthesis of cultures in the urban environment of the black township of Sophiatown, the other despairingly paying homage to the disappearing pastoralism of the rural areas, they both nevertheless established a trend which seemed to indicate that the genre of autobiography was best suited in engaging the imagination of this literary generation, in displacement of the novel form which the Sophiatown Renaissance writers never mastered, as the later novels of Mphahlele and Nkosi, respectively, *The Wanderers* and *The Mating of the Birds*, have shown. Very few black South African writers, particularly of the male gender, have in a sufficient manner displayed a forte for this genre: this undoubtedly, is one of the perplexing questions of South African literary culture. The paucity of this literary generation in producing novels is all the more apparent when compared with the literary productiveness in this genre of their Nigerian counterparts: Wole Soyinka, Gabriel Okara, Chinua Achebe and others. This comparison is not fortuitous as will be apparent in a moment.

Clearly then, *The African Image* and *Home and Exile* defined and articulated the cultural sensibility that was so characteristic of this literary generation. The fundamental importance of Mphahlele's *The African Image* lies not so much in the literary criticism it attempted to effect in the second half of the book, as in the splendid survey of the international black culture to which the Sophiatown

Renaissance was indebted, so majesterially displayed in the first of the book. In the third chapter of the book called "Roots", Mphahlele by implication argues for the essential importance of the Harlem Renaissance for the Sophiatown Renaissance. He mentions in passing only briefly the literary legacy of Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen and others. It is outside the immediate confines of the book itself that we can see the monumental importance of the Harlem Renaissance for Mphahlele's literary generation. In his autobiography of 1984, *Afrika My Music*, Mphahlele makes clear that his first publication, a collections of short stories called *Man Must Live* (1946), could not have been conceivable without his having read Richard Wright's collection of short stories, *Uncle Tom's Children*, published in 1936.¹ Mphahlele also indicates that the exchange letters and his serious encounter with the works of Langston Hughes in 1954, particularly the collection of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, and the collection of short stories, *The Ways of White Folks*, were crucial moments in his intellectual formation. From this set of coincidences, it is clear that the founding of the Sophiatown Renaissance as a literary school and as a historical phenomenon, was simultaneous with Mphahlele's discovery of Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance. Since Mphahlele was the literary editor of *Drum* magazine, around which most, if not all, Sophiatown Renaissance writers congregated, and since he was perhaps the principal exponent of this cultural movement, his encounter with the Harlem Renaissance had profound and deep implications within the Sophiatown Renaissance. The effects of this particular singular encounter can be traced in the writings of two *Drum* writers: in Bloke Modisane's *Blame Me On History* and in Nat Nakasa's *The World of Nat Nakasa*. Retrospectively, it would seem that Ezekiel Mphahlele, Bloke Modisane and Nat Nakasa occupied one wing of the Sophiatown Renaissance, with the passion for the Harlem Renaissance and African-American culture being a central characteristic, and the other wing was in possession of Lewis Nkosi and Can Themba, with European literary tradition as their central focus. Parenthetically, it ought perhaps be indicated that the relationship in 1950's between Ezekiel Mphahlele and Langston Hughes was not something really new in South African literary history, for in the 1940's Richard Wright had a decisive impact on Peter Abrahams which continued in a series of letters, as well as in the 1920's W.E.B. DuBois had a tremendous influence on Sol T. Plaatje, which was also carried out in an exchange of letters.

Still operating outside the immediate confines of *The African Image*, Mphahlele's encounter with the Harlem Renaissance mediated one of the most crucial events of the 1950's and the 1960's in African intellectual history: namely, the forging and establishing of national literatures in South Africa and Nigeria in modern times. While the Sophiatown Renaissance writers embarked on this historical project in South Africa, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo and Gabriel Okara in the Nigerian context were also carrying a similar project. These

two projects found mutual nourishment and reciprocity in each other, when the South African modern national literature and the Nigerian modern national literature, represented by these reviews, *Black Orpheus* (1957-1967) based in Nigeria and *Transition* (1961-1968, 1973-1975) based in Uganda, and subsequently in Ghana. Collaboratively, Ezekiel Mphahlele and Wole Soyinka worked as co-editors in *Black Orpheus*, a magazine which was founded by an Austrian Africanist and a German Africanist, respectively, Ulli Beier and Janheinz Jahn. In *Transition*, Lewis Nkosi and Christopher Okigbo worked closely with Rajat Neogy, the editor of the magazine. Both magazines were the expression of the founding moments in the evolution of modern African national literatures. This founding moment of modern national literatures in the European languages was not specific only to South and Nigeria, for Ngugi wa Thiongo (then James Ngugi) in Kenya, Lenrie Peters in Sierra Leone, David Rubadiri in Malawi, and Kofi Awonnor in Ghana, were the products of this cultural logic within African literary history.

It was in the context of these complex formations and relationships, that in 1961 Ezekiel Mphahlele published an essay on Langston Hughes, which appeared in *Black Orpheus*. Unquestionably, the intended aim, though not fully and consciously articulated, was to uphold Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance as an exemplary national literary school which could literary and culturally inform the literary consciousness and stylistics of the new emerging national literatures. It is for this reason that *The African Image* concerns itself also with Pan-Africanism, as it examines Nkrumah's concept of African Personality. Mphahlele was unclearly specifying that the formation of modern African national literatures had to be realized within the historical and political coordinates of Pan-Africanism. It is only in the second edition of 1974, and not in the original edition of 1962, that the book centrally concerns itself with nationalism. The importance of the Harlem Renaissance for Mphahlele's cultural imagination in *The African Image* enabled him to make a withering critique of the Negritude School, David Diop and others. Having made this damaging rejection of Negritude, Mphahlele attempted to make amends in book edited by him called, *African Writing Today*, but to no avail.

The intellectual odyssey of Ezekiel Mphahlele in exile from 1957 to 1977 is one of the fascinating and consequential in South African cultural history. Besides interlinking the Sophiatown Renaissance to the Harlem Renaissance and to the then emergent modern Nigerian national literature in English, he equally forged a unity of mutual respect, however problematic and fraught with dissensions, between the Negritude movement of Francophone Africa and the national literatures of Anglophone Africa. Also impressive, was Mphahlele's role in Nairobi through the Chemichemi Cultural Center which facilitated the cultural preconditions that were necessary for the emergence of Kenya, national literature

in English. Across the ocean from Kenya, Mphahlele in 1975, together with Wole Soyinka, participated in a historic African-American conference sponsored by Houston A. Baker at the University of Pennsylvania. It was this conference, titled "The Function of Black Criticism at the Present Time, whose proceedings were assembled together by Baker in the book, *Reading Black: Essays in the Criticism of African, Caribbean, and Black-American Literature*, which indicated the formation of great African-American literary and cultural criticism, which has been best exemplified in the work Baker himself and in that of Henry Louis Gates. Mphahlele's historic rendezvous with African-American literature and culture has been continuous from the early 1950's to the early 1980's: his book of 1972, *Voices in the Whirlwind and Other Essays*, and his major essays in Chinua Achebe's magazine of the late 1970's and early 1980's, *Okike*, testify to this constant engagement and commitment. One of Mphahlele's incontestable merits within the Sophiatown Renaissance was to draw and trace the complex map of black intellectual heritage in the twentieth-century in which the Drum literary school could find sustenance. His projects testify to the fact that the ruling imagination order of the Sophiatown Renaissance was in the critical arena, rather than, in the creative sphere.

Lewis Nkosi's book, *Home and Exile*, continued the hegemony of the critical imagination within the Sophiatown Renaissance. Whereas Mphahlele's book sought to establish the lineages of black international culture in the twentieth-century as a systemic process, Nkosi's collection of critical essays was articulated with the aim of incorporating into African literary culture Leavis' ethos of critical evaluation. With Nkosi's book, we encounter the first instance in Africa in which literary criticism announces its own literariness, that is, the text draws attention to itself through the style in which it is written. With *Home and Exile*, African literary criticism transforms itself into an art form. Rather than draw attention to the works it sought to illuminate and explain, the book proclaims its own stylistics. This self consciousness of its own style is carried to high pitch in the brilliant book, *Tasks and Masks*, a book with no precedence, and has not been paralleled since. For Nkosi, writhing well is a matter of morals and ethics; in this, he follows on the critical principles of F.R. Leavis. The famous, or infamous essay, "Fiction by Black South Africans," postulates this thesis. Black South African writers are convicted for writing bad fiction as though Kafka, Dostoyevsky and Joyce had not preceded them. The essay laments the dearth of the creative imagination in South Africa. The criticism of Lewis Nkosi in *Home and Exile* is not historically contextualized, and thus declares its own steadfast formalism, by implying that any style is suitable for any historical-literary moment. Revealingly, because of the implied affinities, the point of comparison is Nigerian literature:

We certainly have nothing to counterpoise against the imaginative power of

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* or the placid grace of its style. Nor do we have anything to equal the teeming inventive genius of Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. To read a novel like Richard Rive's *Emergency* is to gain a minute glimpse into a literary situation which seems to me quite desperate. This spontaneous comparison between South African literature and Nigerian literature is also carried forth in *The African Image*:

There is no cross play of impacts between the literatures of South and West Africa. Communication between them is nil. Although the Nigerians Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Gabriel Okara, Cyprian Ekwensi are sophisticated in a way that Amos Tutuola is not, there is nothing in these four writers like the cultural cross-impacts one finds in the South. Our idioms are different. There are not, in West Africa, the anger, impatience, restlessness, moodiness, semantic violence and the self-assertive laughter which hit the various planes of South African expression. There is an overall steady pace and sedate mood in West African writing.

The contrast in the evaluation of these two literatures between these two critical viewpoints is not of immediate concern here; what is crucial is that they were responding to the cultural logic of a particular historical moment, the formation of modern African national literatures in the European languages.

The decade of the 1960's in African national literature in English. This whole cultural preoccupation was to culminate in the Kampala Conference of 1963 on African Literature in English Expression. The conference was intended to celebrate the victory of this literature over the African Literature in the African Languages, whose genealogy was much wider and deeper. Although there were other writers from other African countries, the largest contingent of writers and intellectuals were South Africans and Nigerians. The only dissenting voice at this Conference was Obi Wali, who proclaimed that the supposed victory of African Literature in English over African Literature in the African Languages will in the long run turn out to have been an illusion. Although the judgment of posterity is still out, there can be no doubt that history is on the side of African Literature in the African Languages.

The decade of the 1960's also in African intellectual history was equally witness to the emergence and formation of African Marxism. This modern African ideology was forged by Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral within the context of the cycle of African revolutions which stretched from the Algerian Revolution (beginning in 1974). In other words, the decade of the 1960's was a revolutionary decade in African history. During this revolutionary decade, the two most consequential intellectual formations, African Marxism and African Literature in the African Languages, passed each other, without giving cognizance to each other and recognizing each other. When they did recognize

and confront each other in the historical moment of Ngugi was Thiongo, it was to be with dramatic results, whose consequences are apparent all over Africa, especially in the South Africa of the late 1980's, when a new democratic South Africa was in the process of emergence. The historical importance of Ngugi was Thiongo will be indicated in a moment.

The Sophiatown Renaissance literature was not the only black legitimacy and appropriateness of this literature, which was part of the African Literature in the European Languages, was being challenged in that same decade. Although this challenge was indirect, it nevertheless indicated the questionableness of this black South African literature. Whilst the Sophiatown Renaissance literature was being forged in the pages of the Drum magazine, A.C. Jordan, then one of the leading literary scholars in South Africa, wrote a series of articles in Africa South, extolling the virtues of African Literature in the African Languages. These essays were later assembled in the book, *Towards an African Literature: The Emergence of Literary Form in Xhosa*. Using the instance of Xhosa literature, as a particular example, A.C. Jordan argues for the greater literary heritage and cultural splay in the African languages. He traces the emergence of literary form from Ntsikana to Mqhayi, and its subsequent cultural metamorphosis. Clearly, A.C. Jordan's exemplary nature, is that he shows that in South African literary history, or for that matter, in African literary history, since the advent of modern European colonialism and imperialism, there has been a secret war between African Literature in the African Languages and African Literature in the European Languages. The names of Mazisi Kunene and Ngugi was Thiongo relate this fascinating story and tragic history.

The other black South African literature of the 1950's contesting for intellectual space, was the District Six Renaissance writing, consisting in the main of three so-called Coloured writers: James Mathews, Richard Rive and Alex La Guma. In contrast to the Sophiatown Renaissance writers, who were more concerned with retracing and establishing lineages, the District Six Renaissance writers were preoccupied with making a fundamental critique of Apartheid in the short story form or in the poetic mode. Mathews uncompromising hostility towards the white-minority ruling regime is absolutely clear:

It is said
that poets write of beauty
of form, of flowers and of love
but the words I write
are of pain and rage

I am no minstrel
who sings songs of joy
mine a lament

I wail of a land
hideous with open graves
waiting for the slaughtered ones

Balladeers strum their lutes and sing
I cannot join in their merriment
My heart drowned in bitterness
with the agony of what white
man's law has done.

In the short story form also, the voice of James Mathews is virulently oppositional. Such short stories as "Azikwelwa" and "The Park," in the anthology *The Park and Other Stories*, are classics of South African protest literature.

Richard Rive's short stories in *African Songs* are also classic protest literature. In the late 1950's, the South African short story form, particularly as it was practised by District Six Renaissance writers, was the literary form which profoundly grappled with South African history. One short story from this book, "The bench," has been anthologized extensively, relates the defiance of Apartheid laws. It was this short story which was selected by Langston Hughes for the first prize in a competition held by *Drum* magazine in the late 1950's. From this moment blossomed a long friendship between Richard Rive and Langston Hughes. It is therefore not accidental that *African Songs* is dedicated to Hughes, and is prefaced by his poem, "The Weary Blues." It was Hughes who put Richard Rive in touch with Ezekiel Mphahlele, then the literary editor of *Drum* magazine: in other words, it was Langston Hughes who was the mediating process in the initial contact between the Sophiatown Renaissance and the District Six Renaissance. The close friendship between Mphahlele and Rive was terminated last year, on June 3, 1989, when Rive was mysteriously assassinated.

Perhaps the most well-known writer of this literary school was Alex La Guma. His first book, the novella, *A Walk In The Night*, which was first published by Mbari Publications in Nigeria in 1962, set the tone for later literary works, in showing the development of political consciousness in opposition to Apartheid. The circumstances of the publication of this novella clearly shows again the close proximity and affinities between the South African national literature and the Nigerian national literature of the late 1950's and the early 1960's. The literary works of Alex La Guma are bathed in the ideology of Communism, hence the most oppositional and most passionately committed to the upcoming new South Africa. The literary verve of these works have had few equals in South Africa.

What terminated the literary moments of the Sophiatown Renaissance and the

District Six Renaissance was the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960. The Drum literary school en-mass went into exile, while some members of the latter school also subsequently went into exile. From the mid-sixties to the early 1970's, to a large extent, black South African literature was only being practiced in exile, while in South Africa itself the literary landscape was a cultural wasteland. It was at this moment of cultural trauma that the youngest member of the Sophiatown Renaissance writers, Nat Nakasa, who had remained behind in South Africa until 1964, with the assistance of Nadine Gordimer, started the literary and cultural review, *The Classic*, which struggled successfully to uphold a literary tradition in adverse times. It was this literary review which carried the legacy of the Sophiatown Renaissance to the next literary generation, the Staffrider literary school, which emerged in 1978, following the Soweto Uprising of 1976. *The Classic* forged a bridge-head between the two literary generations and literary schools, across the cultural desert. It was in this review that enabled Mongane Serote, a very prominent member of the Staffrider literary school (also known as the Black Consciousness literary generation), to find sustenance. The singular importance of Nadine Gordimer in South African cultural history, whom today is fashionable to attack without cause, besides her greatness as a writer, was to have held the memory of black South African literature in her book, *The Black Interpreters*, which appeared in 1973. The importance of Nadine Gordimer for black South African literature is beyond over-estimating.

While the Staffrider literary school was in the process of gestation, a book of poetry by Oswald Mtshali appeared in 1971, which in effect announced the dawning of a new literary season after the nightmare of drought, which had so profoundly traumatized black South African literature. *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* is a book of deep historical affirmations and connections. This anthology of poetry equally proclaimed that whereas the decade of the 1950's had been a moment of the short story form and literary criticism, the upcoming decade of the 1970's would witness the hegemony of the poetic imagination with the black South African literary order. Unquestionably, the Black Consciousness writers confirmed and fulfilled this prediction. Nadine Gordimer, in a Foreword to the book, characterizes well the auspicious moment of Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali: "Many people write poetry, but there are few poets in any generation. There is a new world you will enter through these poems is a black man's world made by white men." A poem such as "Reapers in a Mieliefeld" exemplifies the thesis formulated by Nadine Gordimer:

Faces furrowed and wet with sweat,
 Bags tied to their wasp waists,
 women reapers bend mielie stalks,
 break cobs in rustling sheaths,
 toss them in the bags
 and move through row upon row of maize

 Thirst is slaked in seconds,
 Men jerk bags like feather cushions
 and women become prancing wild mares;
 soon the day's work will be done
 and the reapers will rest in their kraals.

The poetry of Mtshali is concerned with the actuality of suffering and exploitation, rather than content itself with the tribulations under the Apartheid system. It is this particular theme which makes it a poetry of conscience, which proximates it to the work of Attila Jozsef and Nazim Hikmet, among many others.

Parallel to Oswald Mtshali, a new poet and writer emerged who attempted to forge the lines of continuity between the Sophiatown Renaissance and the then emerging Staffrider literary school, articulating the ideology of Black Consciousness. To a large extent, Steve Biko was the political and ideological inspirator of this literary generation. Although with the progression of time many of these writers (which included among them Mafika Gwala, Njabulo Ndebele and Mbulelo Mzamane) were to abandon this nationalistic ideology, their emergence as poetic voices was facilitated by it. In contrast with the Sophiatown Renaissance writers who had direct links to the Harlem Renaissance generation was influenced by the philosophical works of literary generation was influenced by the philosophical works of Frantz Fanon and Leopold Sedar Senghor, and the poetry of David Diop and Aime Cesaire. Serote's sixty-page poem, No Baby Must Weep, would not have been possible without Return To My Native Land, and in Serote we find deep echoes of Aime Cesaire. This short excerpt from No Baby Must Weep illustrates this influence:

my laughter will rumble on the distant horizon
 like my drums which have always wept
 when the river was dark
 and the river coiled its flow and hid its depth
 when the river was deep
 and the breeze had ceased to blow
 when the bird's whistle was mute
 and the river was dark
 and the river was cold
 and my voice hung in the air
 like a ripe fruit which glittered over rocks
 when the river was dark
 and the streets of this town led to nowhere
 when the river was dark
 i waited for the moon
 when my footprints were like frozen rats

following me to the sea-sand
and my scream smashed
and my voice splashed
and my tears rose and broke and fell
when the rhythm of red heart reared my life
when the rhythm of my heart waded through my sorrow
and my sorrow so deep
and my despair was deep, deep like a deep pit dark with depth

Mafika Gwala, belonging to the same literary generation as Mongane Serote, exhibits a different set of influences, as this excerpt from "Bluesing In" would seem to indicate:

Blues, blues
Namibia blues 1904
General von Trotha hounds down
Herero women and children
to genocide
for settler dreams to survive

Blues, blues
Liberation blues 1974
Students mourn Tiro's parcel bomb murder
One can't shout Viva Frelimo
without thinking of S.B. cops
and police dogs

These particular instances of Mafika Gwala and Mongane Serote would seem to indicate that the Staffrider literary generation was a product of the confluence of the Harlem Renaissance and the Negritude Movement. South African literary history has always been a crossroad of various confluences, thereby immeasurably enriching its poet and literature.

This literary school, called Staffrider, after the literary and cultural review founded in 1978 and became their first publication medium, also produced two brilliant literary scholars who were also creative writers, Njabulo Ndebele and Mbulelo Mzamane. Mzamane has recently written a fascinatingly synoptic history of the South African short story over the last forty-years. His documentary novel or non-fiction novel, *The Children of Soweto*, grapples credibly enough with the whole historical experience known as the Soweto Uprising of 1976. It is Njabulo Ndebele who has perhaps most sharply formulated the problematic characteristic of the intersecting point between literary creativity and political commitment in the South Africa of the 1970's. In the essay, "South African Writers Must Create New Insights," Ndebele writes: "It seems to me that a large part of the African resistance to the evil of apartheid

has until recently, consisted of a largely descriptive documentation of suffering. And the bulk of the fiction, through an almost total concern with the political theme, has in following this tradition, largely documented rather than explained. Not that the political theme itself was not valid, on the contrary it is worth exploring almost as a duty. It was the manner of its treatment that became the subject of increasing dissatisfaction to me." From this dissatisfaction with the literary practice of writing about historical experiences in which oppressive politics are hegemonic, Njabulo Ndebele has been able to write some of the compelling stories in *Fools and Other Stories*. In some of these stories the literary style of Ndebele is as much an object to be contemplated and marvelled at as much as the politics of Apartheid are to be studied and examined. In Ndebele literary style and politics are on par with each other, the other does not overturn the other, hence avoiding unevenness. The stories of Ndebele are harmoniously balance, structurally, stylistically, politically and philosophically. In other words Ndebele takes off within the Staffrider literary generation from where Can Themba within the Sophiatown Renaissance literary generation left off. Is it merely a coincidence that the return of Ezekiel Mphahlele in 1977, after a twenty-year self-imposed exile coincided with the emergence of the literary generation of the 1970'!

The decade of the 1980's, a moment in which the ideology and system of Apartheid enters into a serious historical crisis and begins to disintegrate, is principally characterized by four literary phenomena: the explosion of a black theater in the English language, a re-invention of a literary genre which had practically been absent forty years; the consolidation of a black publishing house, Skottaville; the emergence of women novelists and short story writers such as Laurette Ngcobo, Miriam Tlali and Gladys Thomas; and lastly, perhaps more important historically, the development of a workers' theater in the African Languages accompanied by a poetic movement known as "Black Mamba Rising," both of which are part of a greater cultural movement. Since these are developments whose ultimate historical and cultural logic is still very much in the process of evolution, only a few of them will be touched upon, even at that summarily, in the remaining part of this presentation.

The New Black Theater of the `1980's has profoundly attempted to deal with the political and crisis of the country, whether it be police brutality, the historical illegitimacy of the Homeland system, the migrant labour system or the effects of racial discrimination. Mbongeni Ngema, Matsemela Manaka, Percy Mtwa, Maishe Maponya and others have revived this literary genre and re-drawn its connections to the theater of H.I.E. Dhlomo of the 1940's. The immediate predecessor to this New Black Theater is Bison Kente who forged a theater of lamentation which was principally concerned with the weight of racial oppression. The theater of Gibson Kente was provincial in that it mainly concerned itself with township politics, whereas the New Black Theater sought to

unravel the political coordinated of national politics. The latter theater has found inspiration in theater of Wole Soyinka and Amiri Baraka. In a book called, *Woza Afrika: An Anthology of South African Plays*, an anthology of plays from the New Black Theater, both Soyinka and Baraka have written eloquently about this black theater. In the Foreword to the text, Wole Soyinka writes: "The torture and death of Steve Biko, the massacres of Sharpeville and Soweto, internecine wars at Crossroads ignited and fueled by a diabolical regime, death and torture in hidden cells . . . these are the images of reality that flood the mind by the mere fact of contemporary South African theater. Amiri Baraka articulates this theater in these words: "This, in essence, is what the plays in this book do, make us see more clearly, clarify and redefine. The struggle's intensification made it necessary to unveil the people themselves, their own voices and the tearful accents of their personal tragedies--brought together to make national and international tragedy." In other works, in being concerned with the national matters of South Africa, the New Black Theater acquires universal acclaim.

Simultaneously emerging with the New Black Theater, though not necessarily in conscious relation to each other, was a group of black women novelists and short story writers: Miriam Tlali, Laurette Ngcobo and Gladys Thomas. Although their writings precedes this decade, it is only when they make a fundamental rendezvous with South African history that their collective expression marks a demarcating point in our literary history. Lewis Nkosi, perhaps Africa's foremost literary critic, has with uncharacteristic violence attacked the writings of these three authors as merely documentary propaganda, lacking literary verve and exhibiting an atrociously weak grasp of English literary styles. This virulent criticism on the part of Nkosi is misplaced and mistaken, for what these three writers have indicated in their writings in the English language. This is a historical issue which Lewis Nkosi and his literary generation, the Sophiatown renaissance writers, thought they had resolved thirty-five years ago. It is astonishing to note that Mphahlele's return to South Africa after a twenty-year self-exile period was part of a mission to defend and, if necessary, to revive the supremacy of the English language among South African intellectuals and writers, which he felt was under attack by Apartheid's cultural policies. This is a position Mphahlele makes clear in the first few pages of his autobiography, *Afrika My Music*, which partly accounts for his having returned to South Africa. Mphahlele does not exhibit the slightest concern for the status of African languages which have had a much more horrifying experience under Apartheid. Whilst Ngugi was Thiongo was moving towards the African languages, Mphahlele was moving deeper in sustaining and supporting the hegemony of the English language on Africa's literary imagination. What Lewis Nkosi has failed to register by attacking this new writing, by implication also Mphahlele, is that black South African writing in the English language is monic. The best black South African creative writer over the last thirty years is the great

Zulu poet, Mazisi Kunene, over the last fifteen years Professor of African Languages at UCLA. Earlier I mentioned the secret was in African literary history, between the literature in the African languages and that in the European languages; in South African literary history, Mazisi Kunene has practically irreversibly changed the terms of the conflict in favour of the African languages. Lewis Nkosi and Ezekiel Mphahlele have been blind to this earth-shaking achievement on the part of Mazisi Kunene. Whilst both our outstanding literary critic and our outstanding literary scholar can afford to be oblivious to this new phenomenon, creative writers in South Africa have had to adjust or respond to the changing historical logic in creative writing; this is particularly so for marginalized writers such as Gladys Thomas, Miriam Tlali and Laurette Ngcobo, writers who have planted deep cultural roots into the native soil. Even though these writers are continuing a literary lineage passing through Bessie Head, the certainty as to the legitimacy of this heritage. For that matter, all literary heritages by black South Africans in the English language. A confirmation of the achievement of Mazisi Kunene is a truly historic event which happened in South Africa towards the end of the 1980's: the coming into being of a workers' poetry and theater created by workers themselves in Zulu and Xhosa (i.e., in the African languages), generally known as "Black Mamba Rising," a name taken from an anthology that assembled their poetry together.

The literary school of "Black Mamba Rising," is part of the cultural and political movement which is associated with the United Democratic Front, which in turn is closely associated with the African National Congress. This literary movement consists of three members, two men and a woman, two Xhosa speakers and a Zulu speaker, although a larger portion of their work is written in the Zulu language. Nise Malange, Alfred Temba Qabula and Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo have resurrected a literary heritage which passed through Ntsikana and Mqhayi and culminates in Mazisi Kunene. These three poets go beyond the achievement of Mazisi Kunene in that they utilize a plebeian language instead of an aristocratic language, and they have wedded an innovative language with revolutionary politics and revolutionary culture. In another context we have indicated the nature of their achievement. A contemporary exemplary figure for this literary school of workers' movement is the Kenyan writer, Ngugi was Thiongo. In their newly founded literary and cultural review, IQINISD, published in late 1988 and in effect closing the decade of the 1980's, they have published in Zulu an excerpt from the writings of Ngugi. In fact, Ngugi was Thiongo is the only writer in the first issue of the journal to whom they pay homage. Clearly, these cultural workers are clearly conscious and aware of Ngugi was Thiongo's efforts to found a revolutionary national culture in Kenya, which for Ngugi can only come into being through an African national language. It is this example, of forging a national literature in an African language and a revolutionary culture, which the cultural workers in South Africa find so

inspiring about Ngugi, and which they believe should be followed throughout Africa. Ngugi wa Thiongo in the 1970 and in the 1980's represents the conjunction point between the African Marxism of Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral, and the modern African national literatures in the European languages. The outcome of this collision in the historical personality of Ngugi wa Thiongo has had the following revolutionary consequences: the development of the thesis that an authentic modern African national literatures must be written in the African language, inextricably wedded to the historical consciousness of the peasantry and the working class. For Ngugi, it is only under these historical circumstances that authentic African national cultures, which are anti-imperialist and are anti-neo-colonial, can come into being. These three workers, Alfred Temba Qubula, Nise Malange and Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo, have lain claim to a great black intellectual tradition, namely, the African Marxism of Fanon and Cabral, which in turn derives from the intellectual and cultural heritage of Aime Cesaire, C.L.R. James and W.E.B. DuBois and others. The emergence of "Black Mamba Rising" has been truly epoch-making, in that this cultural movement is moving in tandem with the political forces which are at the threshold of liberation South Africa. Its defining of the decade of the 1980's is more fundamental than the emergence of black Afrikaans literature in the same decade. The instance of Ngugi wa Thiongo and "Black Mamba Rising" signifies the beginning of the end of the dominance of modern African national literatures in the European languages, which Langston Hughes, in his two edited books on Africa, *African Treasures* and *Poems from Black Africa*, presented to the international community, respectively in 1959 and in 1963.

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4. Houston A. Baker (ed.), *Reading black: Essays in the Criticism of African, Caribbean, and Black American Literature*, University of Pennsylvania, 1976.
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8. Bloke Modisane, "African Writers' Summit," *Transition*, vol. 2 no. 5, 30 July to 29 August 1962, pp. 5-6.
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Richard Rive, *African Songs*, Seven Seas Publishers, Berlin, 1963.
12. Richard Rive, *African Songs*, Seven Seas Publishers, Berlin, 1963.
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21. Amiri Baraka, "Preface," op. cit., pp. xiii-xvi.
22. Ezekiel Mphahlele, "The Sounds Begin Again," op. cit., p. 7.
23. Ntongela Masilela, "Issues in the Historiography of South African Literature," lecture presented in late 1988 in Bad Boll, West Germany. Forthcoming in the Evangelische Akademie publication.