

Les Switzer (ed.). **South Africa 's Alternative Press: Voices of Protest and Resistance, 1880s-1960s .**

Cambridge University Press: Cambridge , 1997. 400 pp.

This book is a work of outstanding scholarship. Les Switzer has assembled a brilliant text which is absolutely riveting in its comprehensiveness. I have no doubt whatsoever that it constitutes a landmark in South African intellectual history. The downfall of apartheid in 1994, has opened a wide vista for many of us African intellectuals, whether in residence in our own country or as expatriates in foreign lands, a space of historical possibilities in which to reconstruct African intellectual history in South Africa . The scholarship of Les Switzer, exemplified in **South Africa's Alternative Press** or in its predecessor **The Black Press in South Africa and Lesotho** (1979, co-authored with Donna Switzer), has proven absolutely indispensable for such an undertaking. This is because African intellectual history in South Africa from the 1880s to the 1950s, from *Imvo Zabantsundu* newspaper to *Drum* magazine, from John Tengo Jabavu to Ezekiel Mphahlele, can largely be reconstructed through newspapers and reviews, since these were major forums of expression for the majority of New African intellectuals within the New African Movement. The New African Movement (founded by Pixley ka Isaka Seme with his great manifesto of 1905, "The Regeneration of Africa", and terminated by the catastrophe of the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960) was principally preoccupied with constructing modernity and modernism in South Africa .

Whether be it Allan Kirkland Soga and Walter Rubusana founding *Izwi Labantu* (Voice of the People) in 1897 in East London as a way of countering the increasingly reactionary voice of John Tengo Jabavu, or F. Z. S. Peregrino founding the *South African Spectator* in 1900 in Cape Town in order to propagate the Pan-Africanist philosophy, or Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in his *Indian Opinion* in 1900s devising satyagraha strategies for bringing down the white hegemonic order, or Harold Cressy and Abdullah Abdurahman in *A. P. O.* in 1910s establishing a connection between New Negro modernity and New African modernity, or Solomon T. Plaatje writing in his *Tsala ea Batho* (People's Friend) in 1910s a major essay on London as a great modernist city, or R. V. Selope Thema and H. Selby Msimang in *Umteteli wa Bantu* (Mouthpiece of the People) in the 1920s mapping a conceptual structure of African modernity in the making, or H. I. E. Dhlomo in *Ilanga lase Natal* (Natal Sun, having been founded by John L. Dube in 1903 in Durban) in the 1940s writing his major essays and great prose poems, or Jordan K. Ngubane as editor of *Inkundla ya Bantu* (People's Forum) in the 1940s articulating African Nationalism as the 'natural' ideology of the ANC rather than Marxism, or the Sophiatown Renaissance

intellectuals of the 1950s in *Drum* emulating the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s---all of these New African intellectuals were deeply engaged with how to transform the forceful entry of European modernity into Africa history by creating a African modernist experience and sensibility.

Given this monumental project in the making African modernity in South Africa , the insight of Les Switzer is to have seen the necessity of books about the historical importance of newspapers in which this endeavour was undertaken. **The Black Press in South Africa and Lesotho** consists of hundreds and hundreds of extraordinarily detailed descriptions of the nature of these newspapers: the New African intellectuals who contributed to each of them; their religious, political, cultural and social alignments; the moment of their founding and duration; and the nature of the holdings of these newspapers in various libraries in Southern Africa. **South Africa's Alternative Press** complements this earlier book by showing that what appeared as straightforward journalism was in actual fact a process of the construction of a complex structure of South African cultural and intellectual history. In the Preface, Switzer characterizes his project with these words: "In a sense, the texts function as a mediated history of South Africa by its subaltern communities, and can be compared with similar mediated histories of the United States and other culturally diverse societies by their subaltern communities." (p.xiii). The expansiveness of the book in the coverage of this intellectual map is very impressive. In Part I, called An Independent Protest Press, 1880s-1930s, are the following chapters: The Beginnings of African Protest Journalism at the Cape by Les Switzer; "Qude maniki" John L. Dube, Pioneer Editor of *Ilanga lase Natal* by R. Hunt Davis, Jr.; From Advocacy to Mobilization: *Indian Opinion* , 1903-1914 by Uma Shashikant Metshire; Voice of the Coloured Elite: *APO* , 1909-1923 by Mohamed Adhikari; Moderate and Militant Voices in the African Nationalist Press during the 1920s by Les Switzer; *Bantu World* and the Origins of a Captive African Commercial Press by Les Switzer. In Part II, designated From Protest to Resistance, 1940s-1960s, the chapters are encountered: Under Siege: *Inkundla ya Bantu* and the African Nationalist Movement, 1938-1951 by Les Switzer and Ime Ukpanah; The Sophiatown Generation: Black Literary Journalism during the 1950s by R. Neville Choonoo; Socialism and the Resistance Movement: The Life and Times of the *Guardian* , 1937-1952 by Les Switzer; Writing Left: The Journalism of Ruth First and the *Guardian* in the 1950s by Don Pinnock; *Inkululeko* : Organ of the Communist Party of South Africa, 1939-1950 by Elizabeth Ceirog Jones. And an Appendix: A Content Analysis of Six Newspapers in a Time Series (1919-1952). On the whole, the contributions are of high quality.

In a masterly "Introduction: South Africa 's Alternative Press in Perspective", Les Switzer unifies all these contributions by outlining the theoretical and methodological concerns of the book. He divides the history of the African press

into four phases: the African mission press (1830s-1880s); the independent protest press (1880s-1930s); the early resistance press (1930s-1960s); the later resistance press (1970s-1980s). Having established this historical splay as a background, Switzer then examines particular theoretical and conceptual issues: the transformation of original European mission newspapers, journals, magazines and newsletters through a fascinating metamorphoses into New African organs of expression, or if this process of appropriation failed, how oppositional forms of expression were forged; the intersection of economic, cultural, social and historical issues in the making of African protest newspapers and journals, whose existence in many ways were fragile; the formation of the urban African population, the principal readers of these expressive forums, by the new emergent modernities; the replacement of these black middle class literary organs by the socialist ones, either as their alternatives or in opposition to them; the forging of different modernities by Africans and white Africans within the same historical space and national territory. Switzer is very impressive in his firm grasp of the particularity of each of the many major 'New African' newspapers: be it their intellectual content or their ideological articulation or their singular historical context. It is this awesome grasp of a complicated intellectual and cultural terrain which has made the previous book **The Black Press in South Africa and Lesotho** for all practical purposes an indispensable 'reference' book for many scholars in South African Studies. I see no reason why with time **South Africa's Alternative Press** cannot attain the same status.

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