

The Historical and Literary Moment of Njabulo S. Ndebele

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An essay that defined a particular moment in South African intellectual history in the twentieth century was Nadine Gordimer's "Living in the Interregnum." In it, she articulated the historical crisis that engulfed the country after 1960 with the defeat of the democratic forces following the banning of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress by the apartheid State. The South African Communist Party had been banned in 1950. Borrowing the historical construct of the "interregnum" – as understood by Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci – Gordimer viewed the power struggle in South Africa as one between an oppressive and unjust old order outstaying its historical moment and the new order of liberty and democracy, still uncertain about its scheduled hour of arrival.¹ The interregnum, a force field of political and cultural contestations, lasted for three decades until 1994 when democratic elections brought a new order into being. The year 1960 signified not only the defeat of the aforementioned political movements but was also the termination of the cultural and intellectual phenomenon that some have called the 'New African Movement.' From Oxford- and Columbia-trained lawyer, Pixley ka Isaka Seme's early vision of such a New African Movement in 1904 to the formation of the South African Natives National Congress (later ANC) in 1912 under his aegis, it may be argued that these two historical movements were mutually inseparable, in that the former was the cultural expression of the latter and the latter was the driving political force of the former.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the synergy between the ANC and the New African Movement and the unity of politics and culture it represented, sustained the ANC during its underground struggle and political

exile and, in many ways, enabled its victory in the 1994 democratic elections. Calls by Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki in the years immediately following 1994 for the idea of the African Renaissance may be read as calls for the resurrection or restoration of the 'New African Movement,' or more appropriately, the creation of a cultural politics comparable to that of the century's early years. Yet, this has proved unrealizable. The envisaged unity has not been easy to attain and the rupture between culture and politics would seem to have become permanent. Because of this break, the real crisis of the ANC as a government today has been its inability to create a truly democratic culture, which has led it to the instrumentalization of culture.

Historically, the brilliant essays assembled by Njabulo S. Ndebele in *Fine Lines from the Box: Further Thoughts about Our Country* are a remarkable appraisal of the political consequences of a democratic culture still in its formative stages. His early collection of essays, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (1991), was equally prescient. Intellectually, both books implicitly trace the trajectory and metamorphosis of the cultural category of the 'New African Intellectual' within the New African Movement under white hegemony, to the notion of the Public Intellectual that came into being during democratic majority rule. In this sense, the critical work of Ndebele is an attempt at completing the modernity of the New African that was so central to the project of the New African Movement.

That the critical work of Nadine Gordimer from *The Black Interpreters: Notes on African Writing* (1973) to *Living in Hope and History: Notes from Our Century* (1999) would be the most astute and pertinent in charting the cultural and literary morbidity of the interregnum period is unsurprising. She was one of the very few major intellectuals of the Sophiatown Renaissance – perhaps the last intellectual expression of the New African Movement. She remained at home whereas the majority of this group was scattered into exile – a direct political consequence of the Sharpeville Massacre (1960). In contrast to intellectuals and writers of this historical moment such as Es'kia Mphahlele, Ruth First, Bessie Head, Bloke Modisane and others who felt compelled to go into exile, Gordimer's cultural politics provided a connecting link between what was best in the old order (that is, New African intellectualism) and best in the new order to come (represented by intellectuals like Ndebele, who became known through *Staffrider* magazine). The connecting link between the past and the future is evident in Gordimer's 1966 essay on Nat Nakasa, "Our Man Living Through It" (collected in *The Essential Gesture*), and in "New Black Poetry in South Africa" (in *The*

Black Interpreters), on emergent poets such Oswald Mtshali, Wally Mongane Serote, Ndebele and others. Since she was conscious of the permanent rupture of past forms and that their continuation had to be forged in one form or another, Gordimer should perhaps, like Mphahlele, be viewed as the last 'New African Intellectual' of the New African Movement.

In her analysis of the themes "Countryman-Comes-To-Town," "Return of the Been To," "The Ancestors versus the Missionary," "The Way it was Back Home," and "Let My People Go" as the quintessential constructs of modern African literature, Gordimer aligned herself with Mphahlele's *The African Image* (1962) and Lewis Nkosi's *Tasks and Masks* (1981). Although Mphahlele and Nkosi were much more instrumental in the forging of Ndebele's critical imagination, it may be argued that Gordimer was far more critical than the other two in imparting to him the social responsibility of an intellectual whose society was in a state of crisis. The singular contribution of Ndebele to the new democratic order of 1994 is as a Public Intellectual. He has been in the forefront of constructing a strong civil society in the new dispensation. However, it is Gordimer, not Nkosi or Mphahlele or even Ndebele, who has argued that in the new civil society of 1994 African Literature must be written in African languages, free of the hegemony of the European languages. She has, perhaps, written most cogently on this in *Living in Hope and History*.²

In his preface to *Fine Lines from the Box*, Ndebele relates an unforgettable moment in the mid-1960s when he discovered the intellectual tradition of banned Sophiatown Renaissance writers Harry Bloom, Noni Jabavu, Trevor Huddleston and others, hidden in the garage by his father, Nimrod Ndebele, author of one of the first dramas written in isiZulu (*UGubudele namazimuzimu [Gubudele and the Cannibals]*, 1937). Nimrod Ndebele belonged to an early generation of the New African Movement which preceded the Sophiatown Renaissance of the 1950s. This comprised Zulu intellectuals of the 1940s including Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, Anton Lembede, Jordan Ngubane, H. I. E. Dhlomo, Albert Luthuli, C. L. S. Nyembezi, J. C. Dlamini, R. R. R. Dhlomo and Reuben Caluza. The first books Njabulo Ndebele read from his father's secret treasure were Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* and Bloke Modisane's *Blame Me on History*. Despite their strong influences or because of them, the Sophiatown Renaissance writer who shaped his critical imagination in the strongest sense was Nkosi, who may be seen as a direct literary descendant of H. I. E. Dhlomo. Moreover, it was the Zulu Intellectuals of the 1940s who first constructed the art of literary criticism and literary appreciation within the New African Movement.

But before this construction of literary criticism as an art form could occur among Zulu intellectuals, they had to be schooled in understanding the nature of modern intellectual culture as opposed to traditional intellectual culture by their predecessors of the 1920s. These included the *Umteteli wa Bantu* newspaper group: Charlotte Manye Maxeke, James S. Thaele, Henry Selby Msimang, Nontsizi Mgqwetho, Pixley ka Isaka Seme, Abner R. Mapanya, Marshall Maxeke, Richard W. Msimang and others.³ Zulu intellectuals in the twentieth century had more to learn from the poetic genius of Xhosa poet, S. E. K. Mqhayi, than from the military genius of Shaka. While working as assistants to R. V. Selope Thema, *Umteteli's* editor, Jordan Ngubane, H. I. E. Dhlomo and R. R. R. Dhlomo witnessed the last productive period of this great *imbongi* published weekly in *Bantu World* in the second half of the 1930s. When Mqhayi passed away in 1945, it was not surprising that H. I. E. Dhlomo and Jordan Ngubane wrote some of the most moving words commemorating the poet so strongly engaged in the historical divide between tradition and modernity.

It was principally Selope Thema and H. S. Msimang who sought to forge in *Umteteli wa Bantu* ("The Mouthpiece of the People") the historical consciousness of the necessity for modern African intellectual culture within the New African Movement. Although the Xhosa Intellectuals writing in *Imvo Zabantsundu* ("African Opinion") in the 1890s (William Wellington Gqoba, Elijah Makiwane, John Tengo Jabavu, Walter Benson Rubusana, John Knox Bokwe, Isaac W. Wauchope, James Dwane, Pambani Jeremiah Mzimba and Gwayi Tyamazshe) had initiated this modern African intellectual culture among the African people, after distancing themselves from the missionary perspectives of European modernity, they did not possess a historical self-consciousness of it as part of an instance of cosmopolitanism within the black world. The Xhosa intellectuals of this era did not really understand modern African intellectual culture as historical knowledge through which to negotiate modernity. Thema, however, had an understanding of this as evidenced by his many writings in *Bantu World* in the 1930s. He argued that modern African intellectual culture should draw historical lessons from modern African and African American intellectual culture as expressed in the Pan Africanist philosophy of Edward Blyden, Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois. In this context, in the 1930s, Thema and Msimang undertook the project of constructing modern African intellectual culture as historical knowledge just before the emergence of the ideology of a renewed African Nationalism in the writings of Seme in *Umteteli wa Bantu*. Within the New African Movement, Thema and Msimang aimed to achieve this by calling attention to the social and cultural practice of African intellectuals in exercising their social responsibilities to

the New African masses. From their perspective, they posited that they were part of the "New African Talented Tenth," as H. I. E. Dhlomo later observed in *Ilanga lase Natal* ("Natal Sun") in 1940s. This was the appropriation of a concept that Du Bois had articulated in his *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903.

Thema and Msimang's intellectual and political undertakings contributed to the profound crisis that enveloped the ANC in the late 1920s and 1930s. It rendered the organization dysfunctional and induced a sense of malaise about modernity among its leading 'nationalistic' intelligentsia. This malaise is particularly evident in the newspaper articles of Solomon T. Plaatje, who expressed doubt about the sustainability of the moral vision of the 'New Africans.' The crisis took two forms, both stemming from the intensified exploitation of African people by industrializing capitalism and the awakening of a political consciousness in the exponentially increasing working class. The first component was the emergence of the Marxist thinking of Albert Nzula, E. T. Mofutsanyane and James La Guma which challenged the unreflective nationalist ideology of Seme, John Langalibalele Dube and Plaatje. The second component was the eruption of the conflict between regionalism and centralization within the organization, in part due to the authoritarian and incompetent political leadership of Seme (see Thema, "The African National Congress").

In response to both these challenges Seme and others wrote many articles, inventing in the process the ideology of African nationalism and the *idea* of the nation. This renewed enthusiasm for nationalist ideals led Anton Lembede, Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela, A. P. Mda and Jordan Ngubane to found the African National Congress Youth League in 1944. It was no accident that when literary criticism emerged among Zulu intellectuals of the 1940s in Jordan Ngubane's literary evaluation of H. I. E. Dhlomo's *Valley of a Thousand Hills* (1941), it was regarded as the embodiment of a *national spirit*. This idea of the national spirit in literary representation resonates strongly in the writings of Njabulo Ndebele.

In the same vein as others who shaped the ideology of nationalism in the mid-twentieth century, Msimang emphasised that political and intellectual leadership ought to instil a consciousness of patriotism and development among the African masses through education, thriftiness, devotion and trustworthiness. He also argued for the development of a class of professionals: African doctors, lawyers, teachers and traders, who would contribute to the making of a *modern* nation.⁴ H. I. E. Dhlomo, a younger colleague of Thema and Msimang throughout the 1920s, also contributed to *Umteteli wa Bantu*. He assimilated their edicts on how to be modern and transmitted them to the Zulu intellectuals of the 1940s.

The line of literary descent from Thema and Msimang to Dhlomo and thence to Nkosi and Ndebele is a fascinating one to trace. Through it, the social aspects of New African intellectual practices and their embrace of modernity emerge. In the 1930s, Dhlomo deliberated on the emergence of modern artistic practices in correspondence with traditional artistic forms. Since his forte at this time was the theatre, he constructed a literary theory of modern African drama which was, in effect, a social theory of the transition from tradition to modernity. It was as an inventor of literary theory within the New African Movement that Dhlomo had the most pronounced effect on Nkosi in the 1960s and on Ndebele in the 1980s. In an early formulation, he postulated that, since traditional African drama was invariably a combination of religious ritual, rhythmic dances and praise songs, it tended to be imitative as it approximated nature and revelled in propaganda. In contrast, modern African drama should predicate itself on a philosophy of African history, thereby preoccupying itself with ideas. In concerning itself with ideas, modern drama would enable the audience to distinguish fact from fiction, imparting the historical consciousness of progress – the fundamental principle characterizing modernity. Concluding his reflections, he argued that – mid-century – the modern African dramatist was an artist before being a propagandist, a philosopher rather than a reformer, and a psychologist, not a patriot. In another essay, seeking to draw lessons from the meaning of Shakespearean drama for Africa, Dhlomo stated that modern African drama should rely less on theatricality in order to enhance its literariness. For him, this drama would only be able to realize its classicism through its constructed literariness – this was the basis of his passion for Shakespeare at this time – which, paradoxically, was also why he set only one or two of his plays in the present, and situated the others in the African past. He argued that only when the past and present of African drama were seen as a unity, concomitant with the grafting of African drama to European forms, would the arrival of *modern* African drama become discernible. The principal subject would be the reconstruction, reproduction, and recreation of the life experiences of the African people (“Why Study Tribal Dramatic Forms?”). In the two remaining decades of his life, Dhlomo extended these theoretical reflections on the nature of New African modernity and on the poetics of prose poems.

The connection between Dhlomo and Nkosi was a direct one: as Dhlomo’s famous weekly columns in *Ilanga lase Natal* diminished due to his deteriorating health, they were replaced by a new column that his brother, R. R. R. Dhlomo, commissioned Nkosi to write. Dhlomo’s columns, “Busy-Bee” and “X,” which had for over a decade instructed many New African intellectuals on the nature of modernity, abruptly disappeared and

were replaced by Nkosi’s “Life As I See It,” which appeared intermittently, before he left Durban to join *Drum* magazine in Johannesburg. The third stanza of a threnody he wrote as Dhlomo lay dying captured the great esteem in which he held the Zulu essayist, poet and dramatist:

Speak to us again:
Whisper thoughts yet to
empower us
To live the Dream, to live
the Vision
Of a free Africa over again.

(“To Herbert Dhlomo”)⁵

Clearly, Nkosi at the early age of nineteen years was already conscious of the enormous cultural legacy that the prose and poetry of Dhlomo embodied. His intellectual and political ideals had the potential to liberate Africans from colonial oppression and domination. By all indications, it would seem that Dhlomo stirred Nkosi’s short-lived desire to become a poet. Nkosi was, by making Dhlomo his source of inspiration, choosing sides in a major cultural war that had erupted in the early 1930s between B. W. Vilakazi and Dhlomo over whether African literature should be written in African or in European languages. In a letter to the editor of *Ilanga lase Natal* – apparently a response to an earlier letter to the editor by Vilakazi – Dhlomo stated that although he, like Vilakazi, would prefer African writers to write in African languages, the unfortunate reality of the situation was that African writers who wrote in English reached a broader public, thereby enabling writers to gain more remuneration than those who did not do so (“Mr. Vilakazi and Writers”).⁶ Reinforcing his argument, Dhlomo maintained that a novel written in English by an African writer does not change its status as ‘African literature’ because the African psychology, ideas and emotions would remain the same, had it been written in an African language. Archival material available indicates that Vilakazi responded seven years later, arguing that one cannot construct an African cosmological system as well as a moral universe in a work of art by using the very language through which the destruction of that very same cosmological world was mediated.

This conjuncture of the intellectual duel between these 1940s Zulu intellectuals was a critical moment in twentieth century South African cultural history. Most newspapers which articulated ‘New African’ ideas, from Mahatma Gandhi’s *Indian Opinion* to Plaatje’s *Tsala ea Batho* (“The People’s Friend”) and *Umteteli wa Bantu* in the first three decades of the last century, were written in two or three African languages besides English, which invariably appeared on the first page. Even *Bantu World*, which

Thema launched in 1932, followed this format. Sometimes he would add another page in Afrikaans, which he usually wrote himself. After World War II, market forces compelled those New African newspapers that had survived the disaster to appear only in an English-language edition. This was epitomized by *Bantu World*. By the time that *Drum* magazine appeared in 1951, the multilingual world of newspapers was disappearing. In these four decades, the best literature written within the New African Movement was in African languages: in Sesotho, Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* and in Isixhosa, A. C. Jordan's *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya (The Wrath of the Ancestors)* and the poetry of S. E. K. Mqhayi, Nontzisi Mqgqwetho, Vilakazi and J. J. R. Jolobe. African literature in African languages was championed by the great scholar Clement Martyn Doke. The appearance of Peter Abrahams, H. I. E. Dhlomo, Peter Segale, Walter M. B. Nhlapo, Todd Matshikiza and Henry Nxumalo in *Bantu World*, writing in the English language, profoundly altered this world. Writing in the 1930s, they aligned themselves with the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, as did the intellectuals, writers, painters, musicians who later contributed to the Sophiatown Renaissance. As a protégé of Dhlomo, Nkosi was rehearsing for a role among the 1950s *Drum* writers, the first generation of the New African Movement in which English was hegemonic. It must be observed that at the very moment he was schooling himself in the poetics of Dhlomo, his cousin Mazisi Kunene was emerging as an heir to the poetry of Vilakazi.

What Dhlomo really imparted to Nkosi was the critical imagination for appreciating literature. This gift is evident in *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles of African Literature*, one of very few extraordinary works of literary criticism to come from Africa in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, Nkosi's trajectory into the Sophiatown Renaissance proved paradoxical. Instead of bringing the 1940s Zulu intellectuals' legacy to the *Drum* writers, he viewed it as the prehistory of modernity, a cultural outlook that he believed he and his colleagues were the first Africans to invent. This lack of historicity is what has led some scholars to consider its undertaking a failure, as it did not recognize its intellectual antecedents. Of all the individuals thrown together by the vortex of modernity in the 1950s, Nkosi should have been the one to display a sense of historicity, given his consciousness of Dhlomo's legacy. Yet, he was not alone among this group to show a problematic awareness of the value of previous generations of African writers, as Mphahlele's strictures against *Valley of a Thousand Hills* in *The African Image* demonstrate.

In discovering the banned books of *Drum* writers hidden in his father's garage in the mid-1960s, Ndebele not only restored to his imagination and historical consciousness the cultural heritage that stretched from Plaatje to

Mphahlele, but also inscribed himself into the historical memory of the New African Movement. This conclusion also informs Sam Tlhalo Raditlhalo's astute insertion of Ndebele in the "Black Intellectual Tradition" of A. P. Mda and Robert Sobukwe, of Mphahlele's academic criticism, and of Steve Biko's Black Consciousness (Afterword). These historical and cultural influences and encounters have informed Ndebele's versatile imagination. While he was acquiring this versatility by reading, thinking and gaining a historical consciousness through Biko's political philosophy, in the culturally and intellectually deracinated 1970s, Gordimer was undertaking the monumental transformation of the concept of the New African Intellectual into that of the Public Intellectual. Through critical reflection, the concept would open the crisis of the then *present* interregnum period into the *future* of democratic possibilities. In her many essays of this period, Gordimer repeatedly argues that the intellectual (writers, artists and others) should use her critical imagination to render civil society faithfully, in opposition to the undemocratic dictates of the state. The critical practice of an intellectual should always be in the interrogative mode. It is this principle of interrogation that resonates so powerfully in *Fine Lines from the Box* in its investigation of complex phenomena: political, social or cultural. The word 'complex' and the construct 'complexity' are repeated at least twenty times in the book. The complexity that Ndebele deconstructs is commensurate with the complexity of his own imagination.

But before Ndebele could make of himself a consummate Public Intellectual in post-apartheid South Africa, he had to acquire a historical measure of what a New African Intellectual had been in the formation of modern South Africa. Ndebele characterizes Plaatje as a 'new Native' ('New African'), employing the construct of the time that Plaatje himself preferred. Ndebele was captivated by Plaatje's 'complex' language and thought, articulated in his attempt to make sense of the historical divide between past (tradition) and present (modernity). What he found exemplary in Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa* (1916) – a book that examined the devastating consequences of the Natives' Land Act of 1913, which forcibly expelled African people from tradition yet prohibited them from entering and locating themselves in modernity – were five intellectual practices that he subsequently incorporated into his own intellectual practice. Clearly for Ndebele, this particular form of intellectual analysis was, in effect, a form of political practice:

- a) An empirical rigor that Plaatje exemplified to capture the multidimensionality of lived experience that is constantly in the process of a historical becoming.

- b) A practice of inductive reasoning that does not arrive at hasty conclusions because it seeks to grasp the essence of the totalizing nature of oppression.
- c) An analytical approach to the conflictual nature of South African history that is predicated on the dialectical unity of race and class.
- d) A sociological approach based on the contemporaneousness of the past that dispels the myths surrounding the normalcy of things by uncovering the surfaces to reveal the complex dynamics underlying them.
- e) These synthetic forms of analysis and practice enabled Plaatje to be participator, observer and interpreter of the liberation struggle of the South African people.⁷

Several observations are in order. Firstly, this methodology, which Ndebele derived from reading Plaatje's intellectual and political project, would inform his two outstanding essays in *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*: the title essay and "Turkish Tales." On reflection, this methodological theme informs nearly all the essays in the collection, because the opposition between appearance and reality, the contrast between fiction and reality, and the inseparability of essence and form, would eventually become the epistemological principle that structures his brilliant essay form. Secondly, in comparing *Native Life in South Africa* to Washington's *Up From Slavery* and Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, Ndebele was acknowledging the historical fact that the 'New Negro modernity' of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston and Louis Armstrong seminally shaped the 'New African modernity' of Mqgqwetho, Doke and Dhlomo. Peter Abrahams is related to Richard Wright, Nkosi to James Baldwin, Seme to Alain Locke. Like Du Bois, Plaatje made "The Song of Solomon" the epigraph to one chapter; the triadic structure of combining history, sociology and aesthetics or the dialectical form of thesis, antithesis and synthesis of the American is repeated by the African.⁸ Thirdly, in selecting Plaatje for serious intellectual reflection, Ndebele was not only situating himself in a noble legacy, he was also foregrounding the importance of the New African Movement, since Plaatje was, according to Dhlomo, arguably its principal intellectual driving force. Lastly, in choosing Plaatje, Ndebele is in very good company because Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela has on more than one occasion expressed the opinion that the author of *Mhudi* (1930) was his favourite intellectual.

Two other essays mentioned previously demonstrate why *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* was arguably the most celebrated book of the interregnum period. Both early essays, "Turkish Tales" (1984) and "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary" (1986) establish the fundamental theme that would be

constant throughout Ndebele's intellectual life: the distortion of the complex social and historical relations between people or objects (that is, generic forms) occurs when politics intrudes disproportionately into culture, thereby subverting the proper relation between appearance and reality (essence).⁹ This may explain Ndebele's apparent aversion to an over-determined political practice that invariably imposes itself on the culture of writing. "Turkish Tales" reveals three characteristics of his intellectual imagination: the constant posing of fundamental questions; an imaginative reading of fiction guided by an uncommon intuition; and a profound understanding of narrative fiction. These characteristics led him to pose three interrelated questions in a comparison of black South African fiction and Anatolian fiction: what explains the absence of authentic rural portrayal in our fiction? Or as a corollary to this: why does urban culture predominate in this fiction? Does the predominance of urban culture indicate the extent of modernity in South Africa when, in fact, cultural demographics seem to indicate otherwise? The stroke of brilliance lies in not posing direct political questions as one would have expected in the apartheid context, but rather in searching for the structure and genesis of literary form.

By disjuncting itself from tradition, contemporary South African literature lost a sense of historical continuity with the oral narrative forms from which it supposedly emerged. This severance opens our literature to the disproportionate influence of European modernist literary practices, rather than to the poetics of oral narratives forms that Jordan considered a necessity in *Tales from Southern Africa*. This dispensing with the social space of tradition explains the absence of peasant life in literary representation. Ndebele argues that the absence of organic unities between the urban and the rural, and between modernity and tradition in black fiction of the 1970s and 1980s renders it susceptible to deterministic politics of the moment rather than connecting it to the ontology of true politics. The inordinate intrusion of politics not only undermines the autonomy of art but displaces the equipoise between art and society. This disequilibrium makes politically engaged black fiction appear superficial since it is not concerned with the internal coherence of form. The betrayal of form leads to many unintended consequences which debilitate black fiction that is fixated on city life: being ideologically determined, such fiction is merely concerned with indictment rather than the production of knowledge. It cannot give clarity to the tragic nature of oppression; the representation of the personal and the political are collapsed into each other; the moral ideology of this fiction ossifies complex social problems, thereby reducing itself to the surface nature of things. Invariably it wallows in a sensationalism that smothers creative thinking.

This literature is engaged with surfaces rather than deeper processes. It confuses providing information with storytelling; thus it is unable to make a transformative experience palpable. In effect, its sloganeering is an index of its powerlessness.

What makes the essay so powerful is the consistency of its argument that the object of fiction is literariness, which is what makes literature the politics of the moment. In "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary" Ndebele castigates the conspicuous absence of literariness in protest literature. Here, he engages with the over-deterministic politics of oppression, which leads writers to mistake the 'spectacle' of appearance for the complex essence of the 'ordinariness' of life. Traversing a particular stretch of South African literary history from R. R. R. Dhlomo's English-language short stories of the 1930s via the 1950s *Drum* writers to the Black Consciousness writers of the early 1980s, Ndebele illustrates how a preoccupation with spectacle rather than ordinariness confuses the language of exposition (a concern with 'seeing') with the language of creative writing (a fundamental engagement with 'thinking'). The domain of the 'ordinary' is a synthesis of the complexity of redemption, the transformative and the analytical. What is so impressive about this essay is that Ndebele inhabits the interiority of form in order to articulate the proper politics of representation. Three quick observations should be made here. The first is that both these essays are indebted to James Baldwin's "Alas, Poor Richard" and Nkosi's "South Africa: Protest" which inveighed against literature perceived as beholden to the superficial politics of the present that invariably parade themselves in the rhetoric of protest rather than to the art of the poetic form.¹⁰ In accordance with Georg Lukács's distinction, protest literature followed the tradition of imitative naturalism rather than that of critical realism. In interviews and other essays, Ndebele has expressed his indebtedness to Nkosi and Baldwin. Nkosi also has expressed his admiration for Baldwin's critical imagination. Secondly, like Baldwin and Nkosi, Ndebele's brilliance lies in the essay form rather than in the genre of the novel which all three of them have felt the need to practise from time to time. Thirdly, the influence of black American literature on black South African literature, predominant in the early decades of the twentieth century, has continued intermittently even at the present time.

In the third major essay in *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, "Redefining Relevance," Ndebele began articulating a politics of representation that would authentically reflect reality. He postulates that the real periodisation of protest literature extends from 1948 (the National Party's electoral victory and the instituting of apartheid) to 1960 (the Sharpeville Massacre). Further,

he sees 1960 to 1976 (from Sharpeville to the Soweto Student Uprising) as years in which the effects of the protest literature period linger on. Thus, he posits 1976 as the determining year in the period of the interregnum, for in this Uprising or Rebellion the majority of black people transformed themselves into the subjects of history. In repositioning themselves in relation to history, and in contesting white domination, the African people – including the writers, artists and intellectuals – transformed their epistemological grasp of reality, understanding it as dynamic and consequently amenable to change. This repositioning enabled writers to overcome the Manichean perspective that had made reality in their writing appear as a polarity of opposites. In the new context, it became evident that an absolutist viewpoint was incapable of grasping the complex nature of reality. The polarity of absolute opposites was no longer tenable. Instead of latching on to the habits of protest literature, the writers developed a historical self-reflexivity about the practice of writing, recognizing it as a moral vision engaged with the complex nature of irony in the representation of life. Short stories then being written, like those by Ndebele himself (assembled in *Fools and Other Stories*) and others, shared this altered epistemological perspective. In such circumstances, the writer consolidates the power of writing through the forging of historical consciousness: the freeing and opening up of the imaginative space in which the practice of writing can flourish. The extraordinary lucidity of this essay, as well as the others, reminds one of those that Dhlomo wrote in the late 1930s on New African literary theory. Just as Dhlomo shifted his intellectual practice from culture in the 1940s to politics in the 1950s as the result of the Defiance Campaign of 1952 (see Masilela), Ndebele likewise gravitated from the cultural politics of *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* to the ethical politics necessary to construct a viable civil society, in *Fine Lines from the Box*.

The Soweto Student Uprising of 1976 was perhaps the most important determinant of Ndebele's reading of South African cultural and political history, both past and present. The students in civil society resisted the imposition of Afrikaans, thereby precipitating the process that would eventually lead to the democratic elections of 1994. It may be argued that 1976 opened the historical significance of civil society to Ndebele's political and cultural imagination by indicating unambiguously that this social space was the effective struggle zone for democratic ideas and ethical politics. This called for a new intellectual practice and Ndebele himself symbolized its form. It was in the force field of the interregnum that the category of the New African intellectual proved no longer viable while that of the Public Intellectual became a necessity. The making and construction of modernity

had been the *raison d'être* for the emergence of the New African intellectual and it could be argued that with the decapitation of the New African Movement in 1960, it had realized many of its aims though not the most important one: an African Nationalist seizure of state power from the white nationalist regime. In this context, the nearly twenty-five portraits of New African intellectuals, from Elijah Makiwane to Charlotte Maxeke and Seme, that Z. K. Matthews sketched each week from 3 June to 21 Nov. 1961 in *Imvo Zabanzundu*, a year after the New African Movement collapsed, were a sombre valedictory gesture to a disappearing historical category and particular intellectual practice.

Gordimer's writings during the interregnum reflected the terminus of the New African intellectual and the gestation of the Public Intellectual. The Congress of South African Writers was a cultural space in which old and new interfaced, since both Gordimer and Ndebele were among its principal founders in 1987 and steered its course towards civil society. What then of this construct, the Public Intellectual? Acknowledging the influence of African American writer Baldwin and African American political leader Malcolm X on his understanding of public intellectual practice, Edward Said argues that the consciousness of such an intellectual is informed by opposition rather than accommodation, and dissension from the status quo, in the interests of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups. The introduction to *Representations of the Intellectual* makes clear that this understanding of the Public Intellectual's role is partly derived from his own personal experience in Palestinian politics and American academic life. For Ndebele, the intellectual practice of the Public Intellectual informs many of the extraordinary essays, lectures and interventions in *Fine Lines from the Box*. Undoubtedly, this book marks a crucial moment in our country's political and cultural history. It engages with the most pressing conundrums informing our historical present: how to widen and deepen the democratic attainments achieved in 1994.

Take for instance the essay "Leadership Challenges: Truth and Integrity in an Act of Brinkmanship," originally presented as the Inaugural King Moshoeshoe Memorial Lecture at the University of the Free State, 25 May 2006. Examining the quality of leadership necessary in "a very complex society" in which the "complexity of governance" has constitutionally been put in place, Ndebele argues that its effective form is realized when it complies with the will of the citizens in a counter-intuitive manner. By counter-intuitive, Ndebele means leadership that is open to alternatives other than those prescribed by the force of circumstances. He finds this exemplified in Moshoeshoe's relationship with Mzilikazi in the nineteenth

century and by Nelson Mandela in relationship to white South Africans in our time. Such leadership was practised by ANC founders such as Plaatje, Dube and Seme. The true nature of this leadership is its ability to recognize the legitimacy of an alternative that emerges to contest and democratically replace the present hegemonic and dominant leadership. The present ANC leadership seems incapable of envisioning an alternative that legitimately goes beyond its present dominance. Democracy is predicated on envisioning an alternative beyond one's ability. This is the conundrum of the present crisis in South Africa. Ndebele's prescient analysis is supported by a member of the second generation Public Intellectual, Xolela Mangcu, in his recent powerful book, *To the Brink: The State of Democracy in South Africa*.¹¹

Ndebele's essay on leadership is related to another which analyses the great complexity of South African society: "Acts of Transgression: On Entertaining Difference and Managing Vulnerabilities." Here, Ndebele critiques the practice of clinging to "old solidarities" forged in outdated circumstances when a new historical context has rendered them illegitimate or inoperable. Though they may offer comfort, in a new terrain the assumptions on which they are based would invariably prove false when tested against the new knowledge that has arisen in the development of a complex society. Clinging to untested beliefs or solidarities through old knowledge may be an impediment to discovering and stabilizing new discursive identities. Ndebele argues that the expression of new and contesting voices as well as the declaration of doubts are empowering since they make possible a search for new opportunities and solutions. This is the essence of creativity. He fearlessly touches on two controversial issues by arguing that black empowerment may prove a pitfall if it exceeds the legitimate historical circumstances that necessitated it. Allowing the creation of new knowledge that constantly verifies the assumptions of the past is crucial in a democratic process, since a new order constantly strives to maintain its legitimacy.

These two essays form a thematic pattern with another essay on the necessity of constantly reinventing the self and the nation in order to make available new options and new opportunities. "Learning to Give up Certitudes: Vulnerability in Our Mutual Need" was a Commencement Address at Wesleyan University (USA) in 2004. Here, Ndebele proposes that certitudes should always be open to revision. Taking the instance of South Africa in its transition to democracy, he formulates the idea that the real revolution in the country was the spectacular way in which white leaders revised their ideological belief in white supremacy in such a manner that it

led to the democratic process of majority (black) rule. Certainly, force and violence by blacks contributed to this revision of habits, beliefs and the relinquishing of some privileges. Counter-intuitively, instead of mutual destruction through violence by blacks and whites, a democratic transformation was effected through tolerance and mutual respect. A new moral order was implemented through the invention of a new value system which resolved conflicts and disputes through the principle that there be winners on both sides and no losers. Ndebele is anxious to show that such dramatic changes have not resolved many problems that the country still faces. In the essay "The Ties That Bind: A Search for Common Values" – originally a keynote address to a conference on Values, Education and Democracy in the 21st Century held in Cape Town in 2001 – he contends that six years after the democratic process was initiated, the country still lacked a national consciousness and civic culture that would give social coherence to the totality of the nation and its multicultural society. Here again he argues for the creation of the values of tolerance, accountability, equity, openness, dialogue and multilingualism that would help to form reciprocal relationships, binding together a complex human landscape.

The second central theme of the book, the re-invention of values that would hold the idea of the nation in a cohesive manner during the democratic developmental process, emerges in several essays. Firstly, there is the necessity of making possible an alternative vision of national governance to the dominant one that prevails in the present. This is what Ndebele understands to be the role of the Public Intellectual. In "The Triumph of Narrative: Telling the stories of the TRC," he reflects on the role of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in helping to rehabilitate painful memories by enabling the retelling of hidden stories or narratives associated with the horrors of the apartheid regime. Ideally, the telling of these stories in a new, healing context has the effect of moving the nation from repression to expression, thereby creating the conditions for the emergence of a new national consciousness. This move from the moral desert of apartheid to the moral affirmation of a new nation in the making is made possible by the creation of new thoughts and new worlds. Ndebele repeatedly reflects on the restorative process when new values that underpin the making of a new nation come into being.

This leads to Ndebele's third principal theme: the transformative role of education in creating a new system of values that enables the democratic national experiment. Since he is a superlatively skilled educator and administrator, it is not surprising that many of the essays are concerned with these matters. As the interregnum period neared its end in 1994, he

addressed the political, pedagogical and social crises engulfing the black institutions of higher education founded in 1960s and 1970s in terms of apartheid policy. In "University of the North in the New Era: What the Mosquito Thinks," he takes the instance of the University of the North (now part of the University of Limpopo), of which he had become Vice-Chancellor the year before, and tabulates the problems that had emerged at such institutions: partly through their participation in overthrowing apartheid and partly through the absence of professionalism among some of those in their employ. Other reasons included faculty members' refusal to fulfil their pedagogical responsibilities; damage and theft of university property costing millions of rands; security's failure to prevent such actions; students' refusal to obey the instructions of faculty and disrespect for the pedagogical process; the astonishingly high failure rate; faculty's minimal research and publishing output, and the prevalence of corruption, and nepotism.

Reflecting on these issues, which were traumatizing institutions, Ndebele argues that if the first revolution was the political transformation of the country, a second revolution was slowly occurring in the reconstruction of these institutions, a process that would enable them to participate fully in the upliftment of the quality of life of all citizens. Again for Ndebele this pointed to the need for the transvaluation of values.

The issue of pedagogy in some of the essays is intertwined with the collection's fourth theme: the necessity for reconciliation in order to forge a democratic future. To Ndebele the matter of reconciliation seems to have signalled the end of the era of the interregnum and the beginning of the era of reconstruction. Reconciliation and reconstruction are coupled together in many of the essays, which touch on the AIDS crisis, the idea of the 'African Renaissance,' the abysmal quality of political leadership after the Mandela era, the emergence of a black bourgeoisie that unapologetically feels a sense of entitlement, the relationship between English and the newly empowered African languages in the construction of new cultural and national identities, and the ethical responsibility of the press in the transitional period of political uncertainty.¹² But it is through education that reconciliation can be best effected. In his Inaugural Address "Reaching Out To The World: New Identities on the Horizon?" as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town in 2000, Ndebele spoke of the need for a fundamental attitudinal change in not only education but also the relationship of one citizen to another in the process of forging a new cultural and national identity of South Africanness.¹³ It is in the public domain that citizens, be it in schools, universities, churches or other important sites, can mutually discover each other on the basis of shared values and, together, construct new ones. This is

what apartheid inhibited and prohibited because it was predicated on the principle of white supremacy. This mutual discovery of the interdependence and cultural diversity of citizens would facilitate a mutually agreed process of approaching complex challenges, be they regional, national or global. Ndebele strongly believes that only in civil society can attitudinal change towards new democratic forms be effected and not through politics: it is in this realm that the values of democracy, equality, non-racialism and academic freedom can be strengthened or forged. In this extraordinary address he shows how the reconstruction of new values through mutual interdependency makes reconciliation possible.

As part of the process of shaping civil society in a new democracy, the Mbeki government recommended that some historically privileged white universities and the historically underprivileged black universities be merged together. The National Working Group on University Mergers published a report on how this should be done and these recommendations were eventually implemented. On the Report's publication but before its implementation, Ndebele wrote a series of reflections in the essay "The 'Black' Agenda and South Africa's Universities: Some Sobering Thoughts". He made the novel observation that, before the historic change, all the country's universities were white institutions since they operated under the mandate of white supremacy and apartheid ideology, despite being differentiated into 'white' and 'black' institutions. He sought to understand how, given that political agency in 1994 had shifted from 'white South Africans' to 'black South Africans,' universities could be integrated in a balanced way while simultaneously rectifying the horrendous imbalances of the past. Depending on the strengths and weaknesses in each institution, all had, nonetheless, to be governed by the common denominator that 'black' interest should be consolidated and deepened throughout the nation. This principle should be based on the strengths rather than weaknesses of the respective institutions. For Ndebele, this complicated integration would bring forth new values of mutual respect and understanding across previous historical divisions and would enable new configurations, at personal and institutional levels. The creative reordering of old forms facilitates the shaping of new experiences.

The configuration of new experiences requires a new leadership with the wherewithal to strengthen civil society through academic institutions. This concerned Ndebele in "Higher Education and a New World Order: Towards Leadership without Control," a Keynote Address at the Rhodes Trust Centenary Celebrations in 2003. Ndebele thinks that the complex national transformation required to facilitate reconstruction and reconciliation in a

complex human environment requires visionary and ethical leadership. Such leadership, operating in a global context, would have to shift its priorities in order to undertake and achieve the impossible: from alliances to community, from national interest to global interest, from dominance and control to leadership and empowerment, from war to conflict resolution, from identity to relationship, from secrecy to openness, and from the secular to the sacred. He argues that all South Africans should participate in the process of shifting from the old to the new. Within civil society, creativity and learning in the academic world would be improved in such a transformative context. Institutions of higher learning would enhance intelligence in combination with sensitivity to construct new forms of knowledge. These knowledge systems would inform the nascent democratic structures emerging throughout the country. One of the greatest challenges facing the Public Intellectual in the era of reconstruction and reconciliation is to arrive at a situation in which leadership without control would be a normal everyday occurrence.¹⁴

These complex reflections on the need to strengthen civil society in relation to the State make Ndebele the premier Public Intellectual in South Africa today. Comparing Seetsele Modiri Molema's *The Bantu: Past and Present* (1920), in which one vital aim was to delineate the incipient forms of African nationalism, and *Fine Lines from the Box*, in which the pervasive 'ideology' is national consciousness, it is clear that the category of the New African Intellectual has metamorphosed across the century into that of the Public Intellectual. In as much as H. I. E. Dhlomo, Thema and Peter Abrahams were influenced by Du Bois, Washington and Langston Hughes in constructing their category of intellectual intervention, likewise for Ndebele, Mzamane and Mangcu the examples of Cornel West, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Toni Morrison have been inescapable. The transmigration of this conception of the intellectual over the past century was made possible by the writings of Gordimer during the interregnum period. Given that the black American intellectual experience has been a touchstone for black South African intellectual experience throughout the twentieth century, I would like to summarize the future challenges of the Public Intellectual in our country, in the context of what Cornel West wrote about the dilemma of the black (American) intellectuals about two decades ago: she must strive to work in a practical manner, perhaps as a political activist, in the public domain of civil society rather than in the ivory towers of the academy; she must establish infrastructural lines of communication between the academy and the community; she must strive to stem the tendency of the declining intellectual activity in the black community; she must remain aware that her

political practice is a function of the crisis that inhabits the black community at a particular moment; her intellectual practice should be a combination of social resistance, political engagement and organizational involvement; her intellectualism should be expressed in writing as well as in the forms of oral expression; she should work with her colleagues to establish a newspaper available to the black community as well as founding a major journal that would facilitate discourse among intellectuals. Should she succeed in many of these practices she would truly be a transformative agent of history. Perhaps this is the fundamental quest of a Public Intellectual.

NOTES

1. Gordimer first read "Living in the Interregnum" at the American Library in Warsaw, Poland in 1983. While in exile in Communist Poland, I was profoundly affected by this essay in that it changed my intellectual orientation from Europe to Africa: from Marxism within European philosophy to Marxism within African history. It reminded me that I was first and foremost an African before I became a Marxist.

2. While Nadine Gordimer could write the following beautiful sentence with a false sense of certainty in *The Black Interpreters*, "My own definition is that African writing is writing done in *any language* by Africans themselves and by others of whatever skin colour who share with Africans the experience of having been shaped, mentally and spiritually, by Africa rather than anywhere else in the world" (5), twenty years later her conception of the nature of African literature had changed dramatically, as these sentences from *Living in Hope and History* make clear: "But we writers cannot speak of taking up the challenge of a new century for African literature unless writing in *African languages* becomes the major component of the continent's literature. Without this, one cannot speak of an African literature" (my emphasis, 34). Gordimer knew that the momentous democratic change of 1994 necessitated the construction of a new literary paradigm. These sentences summarize the secret drama of African literary history in the twentieth century. The publication of the approximately 140 isiZulu epics and anthologies still in manuscript form written by Mazisi Kunene will alter completely our understanding of African literature.

3. Editorial Note: *Umteteli wa Bantu* was founded by the Chamber of Mines in 1920 in order to "cultivate 'responsible' African opinion." See James T. Campbell. *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), 280.

4. Since I have written extensively on R. V. Selope Thema elsewhere, I here limit myself to Msimang. Except for their disagreement on the role of Christianity in Africa, their political views coincided at this time. Besides, they both left the ANC in the 1950s for the same reason, that is, radicalism within the organization: Msimang joined the Liberal Party and Selope Thema formed a secessionist wing.

5. In a long conversation I had with Lewis Nkosi on a memorable January day in 1989 in Warsaw, Poland, he mentioned that, because of his close friendship with

Dhlomo's son, Desmond, he was constantly in Dhlomo's house as he lay fighting death.

6. The letter or article by Benedict Vilakazi which provoked this response is no longer traceable.

7. This essay, "Actors and Interpreters: Popular Culture and Progressive Formalism" in *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, was originally given as a Sol Plaatje Memorial Lecture at the University of Bophuthatswana (now University of the Northwest) in 1984. Es'kia Mphahlele's 1983 lecture in the same series, "Literature: A Necessity of A Public Nuisance – An African View," views Plaatje as the originator of the black radical intellectual tradition in South Africa.

8. Du Bois' canonical text of African American culture also influenced a book that inexplicably has been neglected in South African intellectual history: Silas Modiri Molema's *The Bantu: Past and Present* (1920).

9. Reading "Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction" in exile in the mid-1980s in a *Staffrider* magazine (6.1: 1984) that had found its way to West Berlin was as liberating as my reading of Gordimer's "Living in the Interregnum" had been a few years earlier in Warsaw: whereas Gordimer's essay turned this author from Eastern Europe to Africa, Ndebele's argued that the African people had not been completely defeated by apartheid, as I had presumed to be the case. "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary" first appeared in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 12: 2 (April 1986): 143-57.

10. James Baldwin's "Alas, Poor Richard" first appeared in *Reporter* 16 March 1961, and is now gathered in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985*. Lewis Nkosi's "South Africa: Protest" (Oct. 1962) is now collected as "Fiction by Black South Africans" in *Home and Exile and Other Selections*.

11. Siphon Seepe, another Public Intellectual of the second generation has written a book similar to this but of a different order, that is, *Speaking Truth to Power: Reflections on Post 1994 South Africa*.

12. If I do not directly concern myself with political matters in this appreciation of the intellectual practice of Njabulo Ndebele, it is because the first generation of Public Intellectuals, which includes Barney Pitso (presently Vice-Chancellor of the University of South Africa) and Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamani (former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Fort Hare and presently Director of the Centre for African Literary Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal), among others, has principally engaged itself with the question of reconciliation and reconstruction, whereas the second generation, which includes among others Xolela Mangcu (former Director of the Steve Biko Foundation in Cape Town and presently Executive Chairman of the Platform for Public Deliberation of the University of Witwatersrand) and Siphon Seepe (former Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Vista University and presently President of the South African Institute of Race Relations), is directly preoccupied with the political governance of the ANC over the last fifteen years and the political leadership of President Thabo Mbeki over the last decade or so.

13. On becoming Vice-Chancellor, Njabulo Ndebele began contributing extensively to the weekly university newspaper *Monday*. Reading his contributions

regularly for about three years in Los Angeles was an enlightening experience. They deserve to be gathered together in one of his future books.

14. Whereas Public Intellectuals and academics tend to be optimistic about the sacrifices white South Africans would have to make, given their enormous privileges, for reconciliation and reconstruction to succeed, artists tend to be deeply pessimistic: see Hugh Masekela, "Miracle Imperfect: South Africa At Ten: A Nation Under Construction," and Lewis Nkosi, "The Ideology of Reconciliation: Its Effects on South African Culture."

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