Towards a New Public Space: Performance Culture in 1980s South Africa

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Going as far as to discuss political violence and funerals alongside poetry and theatre, this article adopts an inclusive approach to culture and explores the changing nature of performance in 1980s South Africa. Focusing initially on trade unions and worker culture, before widening the discussion, it is shown that those marginalised by apartheid society were able to work at the boundaries of established genres to perform messages of mobilisation that simultaneously created temporarily liberated areas inscribed with new forms of authority and agency. The article considers poetry by Alfred Qabula and Mzwakhe Mbuli; new developments in theatre; and fundamentally political events and argues that each, by blurring the distinction between performer and audience, similarly acted as popular tools of communication. They replaced the literary imaginary of previous decades and created new public space.

Keywords: performance; theatre; poetry; public space; workers; violence

Introduction

The rise of Black Consciousness as a movement and ideology in South Africa during the 1970s established culture as a site of resistance. Culture raised solidarity and African self-awareness (Chapman 2007). Externally, however, this literature little altered Nationalist rule. Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre concludes:

> South African committed poetry has no more effect on the life or death of the South African government than pinpricks on a hippopotamus's hide. (1984, 264)

This perception cannot as readily be applied to the cultural work produced during the following decade. New literary forms appeared that, challenging accepted forms, content, and methods of production, moved from internal resistance to inspiring external revolution. This article takes a broad look at these developments and, though admitting

each section could form its own separate study, argues inclusivity is necessary to fully understand the wide-based climate of performance that emerged. And these cultural changes have become increasingly important recently given the growing popularity of Julius Malema who, relying on repertoires similar to those established during the 1980s, likewise works at the boundary of politics, culture and performance (Gunner 2014).

By using a close textual analysis of worker culture before exploring parallel developments within wider culture, I make two related arguments. First, the apparent gap between politics and culture diminished during the 1980s: each stressed the role of performance and reformulated ideas of audience and actor. Second, the very act of performance made the 'text' visible and resulted in the creation of newly democratic, albeit temporary, 'public spaces' characterised by the assertion of African agency, the ability to challenge established norms, and the simultaneous exhibition of African and Western cultural tropes.[i] The 1970's literary imaginary became replaced by actual physical reality.

The Political Landscape and Trade Unionism

Before continuing the discussion of 1980s South African culture it is necessary to outline the political landscape in what became the bloodiest and most confrontational decade of apartheid. South Africa was cast into international isolation through the imposition of wide-ranging sanctions while, threatened by a militant youth inspired by Black Consciousness and its continuing ideology, the government declared two States of Emergency after 1985. Afrikaner Nationalists may have maintained control of the state but the state was increasingly losing its grip on the country. And the government's worries grew with the creation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) - a complex mix of Black Consciousness and ANC affiliates - and, more crucially for the immediate

discussion, the rise of trade unions.

The worker population had largely been ignored in 1970s liberation politics. However, after the Wiehahn Commission (1979) called for their legalisation, trade unionism surged to prominence. The most notable results were the foundation of the Federation for South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) in 1979 and the Congress of South Africa Trade Unions (COSATU) six years later.[ii] The workers finally had a voice, while the militancy and tools of the wider anti-apartheid struggle were brought onto the factory floor. This included a belief in culture's revolutionary power, as the unions harnessed cultural production for explicitly political ends. FOSATU promoted worker education and cultural production through the dissemination of the *FOSATU Worker News*; workshops including the FOSATU Labour Studies course run between 1980-82 at the University of the Witwatersrand; and by sponsoring choirs, dance-teams, plays, poetry, and theatre.

Through such initiatives and an emphasis on performance, the worker population - including the illiterate and under-educated - established their own inclusive expression that was not just a reflection of dominant Western forms nor divided in cultural-ethnic terms. A 'beautiful phase' (Malange 2002, 119) of cultural production emerged which provided 'an enormous platform for cultural expression everywhere' (Sitas 2002, 95). Both vibrant and uncontrollable, new voices of anger and hope, hatred and love drew on established and newly honed repertoires to challenge dominant discourses and suggest a new South Africa.

Union Poetry

Poetry was the form that dominated. It was adopted as a chief political mobilising technique and, to quote worker poet Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo, became a crucial tool for

'popularising our worker politics' (qtd. Friedman 2011, 100). Praise poetry, in particular, became explicitly married to the rise of the unions and was used to 'express and give substance' (Gunner 1995, 186) to the shift in power towards workers. The most notable examples of this relationship are Alfred Qabula's 'Praise Poem to FOSATU' and his joint performance with Hlatshwayo of 'Tears of a Creator' at the launch of COSATU on 30 November 1985.

Liz Gunner (1989) has previously written on the aptness of Qabula's decision to mould praise poetry to the union situation by combining the natural sounds and landscapes of his rural upbringing with the features of his immediate urban environment. However, such congruency was not straightforward. Qabula's desire to contribute to the history of the workers' struggle through text placed him at odds with the traditional oral form and saw him lead the development of a new genre of 'print-performance' (Gunner 1989, 49). Thus, though implicitly risking the emasculation of Africa cultural practice by adopting a tradition of written poetry that had long been associated with the educated and 'cultural dominants' (Sitas 1994, 140), Qabula actually managed to envisage a future written tradition that allowed for the African and workers' voice. By situating the ordinary people - those who orate - alongside the cultural dominants schooled in written poetry, he implied the potential cultural dominance of the workers' form; created an oeuvre that saw black workers 'asserting their cultural powers whilst demanding at the same time control over them' (Sitas 1994, 150).

Qabula's combination of oral and textual gave voice to those marginalised by society at large. Yet, his initial work saw him unable to escape the hierarchies of his own society. All too frequently Qabula maintained the patriarchal tropes and attitude of macho-virility that characterised a form of 'public praise' and confirmed class divisions between those with status who are praised and able to praise in this way, against the less

specialised and more popular praises of 'ordinary men' (Gunner 1995, 188). 'Praise Poem to FOSATU' is an example, but one that also shows Qabula's attempts to work out these tensions and move away from existing hierarchies to an increasingly simple and everyday performance of dialogue and discussion. For instance, Michael Chapman notes the 'dramatic, colloquial interchange, in which workers argue with bosses' (1999, 37). Here, Qabula does gesture towards confirmed notions of hierarchy, but also suggests a shifting focus between the individual and the larger collective and is seen to be working against dominant dichotomies, including individual/community.

Perhaps most keenly felt in 'Praise Poem to FOSATU' is Qabula's challenge towards the local/national binary. Chapman observes a changing geographical range:

> [It] begins in the [traditional] mode of apostrophe with FOSATU personified in
> several praise names: the moving forests of Africa, the hen that protects the
> chickens, the lion that roars in Pretoria. (1999, 37)

There is a shift from the continental, to the local, to the national that typifies trade union poetry as a whole that attempted to embrace specific and differing local African idioms in the wake of national Nationalist apartheid policy that sought to impose an assumed tribalism. In Qabula's case, he grounded his efforts to circumvent apartheid constructions by writing of the hyper-local and exploiting Durban's local ethnic homogeneity. He worked beyond the state's generalised definitions of ethnic groups and used the Zulu hegemony among the workers to facilitate a comprehensive exploration of local and contemporary contestations and analyse the differences between alternate interpretations of 'Zulu and Zuluness' (Sitas 2002, 104). These oppositions include urban/rural, royalist/democrat, and Inkatha/ANC, although the latter of these and the competition for union membership between the UDF (read ANC) supported COSATU and Inkatha's UWUSA received little attention in much union cultural work (Gready

1994). In exploring these differences rather than simply reflecting them Qabula's poetry opened debate on issues that remain pertinent in contemporary South Africa. He did not present one dominant or accepted norm but rather challenged them and worked alternatives out against each other. Thus, through their performance, Qabula's praises helped established a new public space that hinted towards democratic ideas. The place of performance during his orations temporarily became areas where visions that conflicted with society's dominant discourses could be enunciated and discussed.

Tensions between the urban and rural and the presence of migrancy are also unmistakable. These are chiefly dealt with through a imagery. The countryside is frequently depicted in romanticised terms over an urban environment represented by the 'city and factory that are hell' (Sitas 2002: 98). This is evident in 'Africa'.

> Africa – you are beautiful
> Your hills, mountains, rivers and streams
> -   your fitting ornaments
> Announce your beauty to our eyes. (l. 37-40)

This undulation gives way to criticism of the urban environment. Again with theatrical flair, Qabula condemns the practice of mining and exploitation of Africa's resources. He attacks,

> The highways, the buildings, and factories
> The structures…
> […]
> The trains, the motor cars, machinery. (l. 120-24)

Making 'such a NOISE!' (l. 129), the country's cherished natural beauty and stillness is destroyed. Interestingly, however, a second praise, 'Migrants' Lament – A Song', which contains the most obvious example of the hurt of migrancy, actually contains an ambivalent depiction of nature. The need to journey to the urban areas is seen as

unavoidable because of the hardships hindering rural life, 'all my cattle were dead / my goats and sheep were dead' (l. 2-3). Yet the migrant necessity to find a job causes great emotional turmoil. Leaving the family behind is portrayed as a spiritual wrong through the repetition at the start of each stanza of 'If I have wronged you Lord / Forgive me'. Moreover, the migrant's guilt is then compounded by migrancy's fickle nature. The inability to find employment leads to explicit criticism of the apartheid system, which is made increasingly powerful by Qabula's structural skill and ironic turn of phrase:

> Yes, as my children were happy
> And as I was working
> The blackjacks arrived to arrest me
> So again I lost my job. (l. 42-5)

Beginning with images of rural famine, the penultimate stanza recounts the need to 'buy him beer, meat and brandy / for him to "learn" to read my piece of paper' (l. 57-8). The bribe increases the migrant's poverty but is required in order to remain in the city. The cruel irony sees the lament moves full circle - his hardships are 'realized so far for nothing' (l. 62) - though the technique itself gestures towards a mocking and inversion of hierarchy and class.

'A Migrants Lament – A Song' is also notable for being based on the Christian hymn structure (D. Brown 1996, 136). Qabula's lyrics argue social improvement will only come with political action. He explodes the myth of divine intervention and, as he does elsewhere, explores the nature of Christianity. In 'Tears of a Creator' and 'Praise Poem to FOSATU' these Christian references are incorporated alongside witchcraft. The latter sees recourse to the image of the *sangoma*, which Qabula suggests sanctioned the union. This image is rooted in the African community's belief systems while also suggesting the faith workers placed in the unions to help 'heal' their situation and improve social harmony in the workplace. However, the union is further enhanced as a

saviour through Christian lexis. It is described as 'our Moses' through whom they 'shall reach our Canaan' (l. 167-8). Such religious imagery became the staple of Qabula's later work, when he reduced his 'symbolic storehouse to religious millenarian metaphors' (Sitas 1994, 154). Here, his triumphal metaphors of power, struggle, hunt, and conquest are reduced with a shifting emphasis towards a 'haunting poetry of death and redemption' (156). Thus Qabula creates a poetry of sentiment that offers a self-reflective and critical vision from within. By depicting the familiar through an unfamiliar style, Qabula's later work is remarkable for establishing a uniquely powerful oral performance with heightened emotional purchase.

Though the tone changed, Qabula's praises remained consistently rooted within literary, national, and local dichotomies. He mediated tensions between written and oral forms; the rural and urban environments; Western and African belief systems; and explored questions of class and ethnicity. Consequently, like the unions themselves were doing (Seekings 2000), his performances established a new public space. They asserted African agency and placed together cultural assumptions that had hitherto developed separately. The workers were no longer merely subjects but actively creating and debating new genres and ideas. Qabula's performances responded to the working people but were also performances the working people could themselves respond to. His poetry acted as a tool for mobilisation and finally inspired a worker population that had been unreached by the protest and resistance poetry of the 1970s.

Worker Theatre

Poetry was not the only art form used by workers to mobilise and create new public space. Worker theatre similarly increased in popularity during the 1980s. And, unlike the poetry above that focused on large crowds coming to see one performer, worker

theatre was more intimate and the *audience* had an active role alongside the principal actors.

Worker theatre again displayed the ability of the 'marginalised [to] assume agency by working within and against the rules of a range of genres' (Gready 1994, 165). The plays disturbed the very core of the accepted western performance genre. Each play had to fit in with the work routine of those involved and, consequently, productions and rehearsals were *ad hoc* events dictated by shift patterns and the time demands placed upon workers. The performance space, meanwhile, was the constantly changing factory floor and not a set stage within a theatre venue. This collapsed the Western notion of 'theatre space' - the building - and 'theatrical space' - the staged fiction - whilst also removing the venue as a frame for that performed on stage (Tompkins 2006). Western notions of the stage set off as something apart, different, usually higher, and *watched* was falsified.

Instead, worker theatre was couched within the present African experience - offering a chance to critique and redefine - and drew largely on African performance styles and assumptions where the audience became increasingly dominant. *The Dunlop Play* was one of the earliest examples and quickly established a new genre where performers adopted roles not characters and where symbolism and gesture began to increasingly replace realism. Workers mimed their jobs and improvised their own parts while directly addressing the audience of fellow workers. Additionally, 'techniques of mimesis and re-enactment drawn from traditional storytelling […] provided both expressive resources and a sense of cultural familiarity' (Coplan 1986, 173-4). This familiarity was aided by call and response delivery that, featuring in most worker plays, occurred between actors and the audience and encouraged active participation. Indeed, the audience's own performative role was extensive. Plays were staged whenever and

wherever there was an audience that could be reached and, during performance, extended as far as audience members asking for things to be repeated or offering alternate endings. Gready claims:

> The audience contributed crucially to the emergence, recognition, official authorisation and composition of worker theatre. Theatre was both embedded in and constitutive of an interpretive community. (1994, 172)

The type of participation that arose fractured divisions between actors and audience. Workers defined themselves as an active force while either performing or watching. They were no longer the watched subjects created by their position as employees but continual performers. Worker theatre, therefore, succeeded in creating a highly politicised public space that reconfigured and reworked both African and Western performance assumptions, and established African agency in a space that was previously characterised by their everyday performance of roles of subjugation. Such a space announced the possibility of a 'real democracy' where workers could 'control for the first time [their] productive and creative power'. (Gready 1994, 169).

This, though, was only a provisional realisation. The plays presented a caveat by dramatising a present that glanced towards the past and future, as Bheki Peterson's analyses of *The Sun Shall Rise for Workers* and *The Long March* show. The first 'starts and ends with a song accompanied by slow shuffle dance steps and mime gestures indebted to traditional performance orature' (Peterson 1990, 324-5). It evokes history, traditional idioms, and their practice. *The Long March*, contrastingly, repeatedly features songs of mobilisation and concludes by reminding workers of the continuing strike. 'This comment,' Peterson writes, 'leaves the audience with the realisation that although the play is finished, the conflict continues' (1990, 328).

Black Theatre

New styles of theatre were also developing outside the unions. Black theatre had

arguably existed since the early 1930s (Hauptfleisch 1984) but, despite this, the rise of

Black Consciousness ideology saw this genre radically divided by the People's

Experimental Theatre (PET) company, who sought to distinguish between true 'black

theatre' and 'theatre made by blacks' (Cooper n.d). The latter represented what Robert

Kavanagh (1981) described as town and township theatre that, although having

commercial and, to a lesser extent, political differences, both rested on inter-racial

collaboration. Both were produced by mixed companies, frequently played to mixed

audiences in private venues, and were largely work-shopped or experimental

productions.[iii]

Black theatre, meanwhile, was true to Black Consciousness philosophy and

premised on dissatisfaction with the collaborative groups who, PET argued, failed to tap

sufficiently into contemporary Black experience and political reality. PET thus

proposed 'black theatre' that placed political ideology at the centre of its aesthetic and,

refusing inter-racial collaboration, subsequently broke from white theatre and white

audiences. *Black Review 1972* defined a theatre 'hinged round a proper enunciation of

the feelings, emotions, and hopes of ghetto dwellers through the medium of drama'

(Khoapa 1972, 46) while PET's constitutional preamble dismissed white dominated

theatre as irrelevant and outlined a desire to foster an interchange of ideas to encourage

the development of blacks arts (Moodley n.d, 1-3). These aims were expanded by Saths

Cooper's series of draft articles, 'What is Black Theatre?', which was eventually

published in the *PET Newsletter* and traced the historical narrative of black theatre by

asserting a uniquely African ownership of the form both past and present. Cooper

continued to argue that black theatre was an art form where the 'message becomes the medium', one of defiance, pride and reclamation (n.d, 1). In contrast, and apparently overlooking the political resonance and continual arrest of those involved in Fugard's productions, Cooper felt white influenced theatre was 'mere entertainment' (n.d, 2) because it was not firmly rooted in the black population's daily struggles. Consequently, the proposed new form embraced theatre as a weapon of the struggle and refused to compromise with the established techniques of the genre. A core of energised young playwrights emerged and fourteen official productions were performed in the first six months of 1974. However, only in the 1980s were the first real noteworthy dramas produced.

   Woza Albert! (1981) is a twenty-six scene portrayal of Christ's Second Coming in South Africa written by Percy Mtwa, Mbongeni Ngema, and Barney Simon. It has been performed in America, Canada, England, and continues to be in South Africa. A product of an increasingly volatile society, *Woza Albert!* offered a comprehensive, though consistently humorous, damnation of every facet of apartheid society. Unsurprisingly given the plot, a sense of Black Theology is omnipresent. The play similarly subverts accepted Christian doctrine and undermines fundamentalist interpretations of Christianity. Francis Ngaboh-Smart explains the incorporation and subsequent mocking of the Christian motif as a method of 're-deploying the tools of the system in ways that would transform them into instruments of change and resistance' (1999: 179). These belief systems are also incorporated alongside African beliefs, shown through the notion of the Second Coming that gives agency to the deceased, something with which they are imbued in African mythology. It also portrays a heroic martyr who died for a greater cause and is now used as an inspiration. Similar to the wider ambit of performance culture during the decade, which sought to physically

realise the literary imaginary of the 1970s, the use of the religious motif is important not only for establishing notions of agency and self-inspection, but also for representing important cornerstones of Black Theological belief. These stressed the physical aspect of salvation over the spiritual imaginary and, rooted in immanence not transcendence, placed the focus on the community and the very real possibility of change and flux within society.

A second example of black theatre is Maishe Maponya's *The Hungry Earth*. Though first performed in May 1979 and written as a direct result of the Soweto Uprisings, it is useful to consider its similarities with 1980s performance culture. Maponya started writing during 1975 in the heat of burgeoning revolt and tapped into the energy and complex influences of urban life. These are depicted in *The Hungry Earth* through Brechtian ideas of 'lecture-demonstration' (Hauptfleisch 1984, 147). The beginning of the play reflects the culture-as-resistance motif of 1970s literature in three ways. First, the dialogue begins with an appeal to internal processes of liberation: understanding and accepting the pain of oppression. It is repeated, 'if we could really feel' only then will 'all learn what love is' (Maponya 1984, 151). Second, there is a complete lack of agency afforded to the oppressed. Maponya writes, 'unfortunately Blacks can never be spectators of white creations, only victims' (1984, 158). Third, there is little depiction of a physical endpoint to the struggle, as suggested by Usiviko's nightmare about *umlungu*, the white man. The dream occurs at dawn and suggests an ominous foreboding for the coming day. The morning will not constitute a new start but an inescapable danger, not hidden by darkness, will remain.

The Hungry Earth does, though, reflect cultural developments typical of the 1980s. The play is focused intensely on worker life in Johannesburg's mining compounds and the symbolic and literal day-to-day relationship between their

experience and the wider political situation. Parallel concerns, particularly the desire to overcome national divisions caused by apartheid, are also expressed. *Umlungu* in Usikivo's nightmare is said to have 'divided me against myself' (Maponya 1984: 153) and the play consistently makes appeals to a collective Africa, reminiscent of Qabula's praise 'Africa'. This plea is made through similar criticisms of white exploitation of the land and workers. The white man is attacked for having taken 'gold and silver and all precious stones' (Maponya 1984, 153), while the pillaging of the earth is unmistakable in the chant that ends Scene One:

> MOTHER AFRICA WAKE UP
> AND ARM YOURSELF
> WIPE THE TEARS OF YOUR BRAVE
> MOTHER AFRICA WAKE UP
> LEST UMLUNGU RAPES YOU
> LEST UMLUNGU RAPES YOU. (1984, 155)

The use of chant situates the play firmly within the developments of the 1980s. Ian Steadman, citing the presence of the gumboot dance, has observed how *The Hungry Earth* was based so heavily on performance that its full impact could not be achieved textually, while each performance was continually in flux. A multitude of new experiences was created and no audience saw the same production twice: despite being scripted and structured, 'actors [had] to switch roles at a moments notice […] cut, adapt, reverse and restructure in accordance with circumstances' (Steadman n.d, 8). *The Hungry Earth* remained fluid to the constantly changing realities of performance in South Africa. 'Black theatre' epitomised the increasingly political tone of culture in 1980's South Africa. And, though having noticeable differences, it, like worker culture, likewise provided agency to the African population and opened up a new public space that drew on and deviated from western performance assumptions. During these

performances, with the stressed physicality noted by Steadman, democratic liberation became an increasingly realisable prospect and not just one confined to the literary imaginary.

Performance Poetry Outside The Unions

Theatre has already shown how developments in form and genre within worker culture were being paralleled in a wider cultural arena. This is attributable to the close links between the unions and, primarily, the UDF. It is, therefore, unsurprising that performance poetry outside the union environment was achieving similar effects with a reduced gap between poetry/politics and performer/audience. The poem was continuing to be about more than just the poem.

Perhaps the starkest personification of this was Mzwakhe Mbuli. The son of a practicing *mbube* singer, Mbuli exploited the 'nuanced picture of urban-rural [musical] dynamics' (Erlmann 1966, 56) in South Africa and infused *mbaqanga, isicathamiya* and other genres with rap. He quickly became known as the poet of the people who set out to 'reflect [African] peoples' historical consciousness of their struggle over the decades […] record and preserve the history of the people' (Mkhatshwa 1989, 7). His poetry, meanwhile, was decidedly political - being based on a refusal to 'sing or say empty words' (Mbuli 2001, 67) - and rethought the boundaries of Western and African assumptions. Consistently championing art's political nature and the worker's cultural project, Mbuli perceived himself as a tool of mobilisation; of inspiring and communicating with the masses. And, though, rooted in the pressures of now, his performances created a deeply transitory present, which was merely a basis for excavations of history and a staging point for the future.

Mbuli's anger is explored in 'Many Years Ago', which depicts the horrors and injustices of colonialism on an international scale. Incidents in Biafra and Katanga are compared to the crimes of the Holocaust and the violence seen at Hiroshima. Interestingly, these incidents are depicted in a very physical sense, with reference to phrases such as 'paralyzing laughter' (l. 18). Yet these are also juxtaposed against an almost spiritual rhetoric, which encapsulates Africans' inner determination to survive and persevere and epitomises a sense of hope that runs throughout his oeuvre:

Invaders killed man;
But the soul failed to die;
Usurpers tormented man;
But the spirit failed to surrender. (l. 23-6)

There is also mention of 'the incorrigible planners of perjury' (l. 44). This links to a second major site of resistance in Mbuli's poetry. Not only reasserting his and his people's own history - something also shown symbolically by his decision to wear traditional African garb and, occasionally, skins for the majority of his performances - Mbuli also presented alternative patterns of knowledge. One of the more interesting examples comes in 'Triple "M"'. Criticising the apartheid regime's actions against history and Africa, the poem explores notions of truth - 'Triple "M" why know the truth? / Triple "M" why distort the truth?' (l. 20-1). Mbuli also writes, 'Therefore I am not what you think I am' (l. 7), which can be read as an inversion of Descartes maxim, 'I think therefore I am'. Commonly accepted as the foundation of all knowledge, Mbuli's reconfiguration undermines the hegemonic truth in favour of a liberated alternative and a reassertion of his own African agency. This assertion of independent agency is central to Mbuli's message of change as he witnesses a time 'when South Africa is standing on the threshold of a precarious new era' (Mkhatshwa 1989, 6). Never forgetting the ominous presence of history, whether pre-apartheid or through the

scars of current oppression - 'but Apartheid never retires' (l. 21) - his poetry testifies to his desire to continue honest defiance and speaks impatiently of a new future.

Such impatience finds definition in 'Now is the Time'. With the formulaic framing of each stanza with 'now is the time', Mbuli's declarations insist the present must be embraced as the time for action before it is too late:

> Now is the time;
> To give me roses;
> Not to keep them;
> For my grave to come;
> Give them to me;
> While my heart beats;
> Give them today;
> While my heart yearns for jubilee;
> Now is the time. (l. 20-8)

Here, as throughout the poem, the use of the semi-colon suggests simple patterns of progression but ones that progress rapidly and thus remove the hesitancy that may occur with too long a pause. The last stanza provides the clearest expression:

> Now is the time;
> To violate the eleventh commandment;
> For today's pain is tomorrow's imminent comfort;
> Now is the time;
> Yes it is the time. (l. 45-9)

The allusion to the eleventh commandment, colloquially understood as 'thou shalt not get caught', suggests the legitimacy of wrong doing for the change it will bring. Again impatience finds utterance in the choice of 'imminent'. This choice collapses the length of the present for a quickly found tomorrow, echoed by the rhetorical final positive assertion of 'Yes it is the time'. There is no time for doubt, if anything should be doubted.

The confrontational political tone of Mbuli's lyrics, which simultaneously

afforded African agency, along with his ability to merge cultural repertoires suggested

the realisation of new public space. But it also saw the repeated banning of his work and

made him the subject of four assassination attempts and six spells in detention.

Implicitly the state's reaction assumed a threat that did not lie solely in words but their

reception and performance. Indeed, Mbuli's performances were strongly theatrical

events where the familiar rhetorical devices of oral idioms, including repetition,

parallelism, wordplay and the like, were integrated into an intense musicality. Sole

notes, 'the use of drums, flutes and other musical instruments became almost obligatory

in the reading of poetry' (1987, 257). As such, it appeared that throughout the 1980s it

was the threat of performance and the closing down of performances spaces that was a

greater occurrence than the banning of specific art pieces.

The Threat of Theatricality

The state's concern with the threat posed by the performance and reception of language

and literature can arguably be traced back to the 1975-76 trial State vs. Cooper, when

nine BCM activists were tried under the Terrorism Act in what Lobban describes as a

'trial of ideas and culture' (1996, 45).[iv] The case rested on proving the intensity and

implicit violence of language in BCM publications, which, for the state, sought 'to

denigrate the whites and represent them as inhuman oppressors' (Lobban 1996, 49). The

prosecution consistently attempted to prove literature as more than merely textual, as

exemplified in an exchange between the prosecution and expert witness, Gessler

Nkondo:

    REES: Isn't the poem merely a setting forth of ideas?

NKONDO: No.

REES: What is the poem then? The function of a poem and poetry? (qtd. Lobban 1996, 63)

The threat is implied to be beyond the words and rather lie in their enunciation and reception. Therefore, the interest in Mbuli's performances in the 1980s is not surprising, especially in light of Jeremy Cronin's (n.d) assertion that the very language Mbuli used was a linguistic liberation that acted as a figurative rehearsal space for wider political liberation. The nature of oral performance and subsequent ability to undermine formal linguistic convention allowed what Cronin terms 'poetic language thickening', where

> [harsh consonants and lengthened final syllables] give the English a pronounced, indeed an exaggerated African texture [and] carries a playfulness as well as implications of appropriation and nationalism. (1988, 14)

Such linguistic playfulness, however, remained only one threatening aspect of theatricality. To quote Kelywn Sole,

> Language was increasingly considered as only part of the expressive vocabulary […] Other visual devices were stressed in various attempts at popularization and to evoke a more immediate display of emotion. (1987, 257)

Body language was one such visual technique and performance poets used 'facial expressions [to] enact a "sense" of the poem, [while] hand gestures punctuate[d] climatic or dramatic movements' (Brown 1996, 141). The poems spoke not just to the ears but also the body: 'you don't hear the words after a while, just the resonances' (Chapman 1988, 26). This combination of performative techniques helped express the poem's musicality and rhythm whilst also conveying the political meaning symbolically and more forcefully than words alone. There was an additional power that meant this

performed verse created a new public space with African agency and an assertion of African culture.

The introduction to Mbuli's collection *Before Dawn* describes the poetry as one creating 'dialectics between iconoclasm and the creation of a human cosmos' (Mkhatshwa 1989, 7). His performance is testament to the fact. Though he performed at a range of locations varying from political rallies to funerals, from festivals to church halls, Mbuli consistently challenged the boundary between performer and audience. His lyrics were calls for action that asked the crowd to take on their own active role and his poems relied on the audience's direct inclusion in the performance. They started as mere recitals but became increasingly urgent and invited the audience to accompany Mbuli with their own humming and rhythms. To some extent this group feel was actually relied on to increase the power and pace of delivery.

Audience participation did not just enhance individual poems and performances. These poems and songs actually encouraged audience participation outside the performance venue as well. The 'comrade' movement and youth choirs often appropriated these popular tunes during marches and rallies (Sitas 1992, 635). Subsequently, originally individual pieces gained popular purchase and culture gained political capital. Poetic techniques that resonated with the masses were then appropriated by them as the synergy between personal militarisation and public ritual - the essence of mobilization – collapsed boundaries (Sitas 1992). Aside from determining whether youngsters could belong to the Movement, the sense of unity created by sharing songs and dances played a leading role in the removal of fear. Anthea Jeffrey suggested the youngsters 'feel something akin to intoxication' (2009, 64). Such anesthetising explains the prominence of the *toyi-toyi* and revolutionary

songs, often drawn from traditional resistance songs, at marches where there would undoubtedly be violence and death.

Through these marches culture gained spatial power. Jeremy Cronin (1988) observes the creation of liberated zones where poetry performance in rural locations, townships, and urban industrial ghettos saw the transgression of state restrictions on mobility. The African population performed their own cultural identity and achieved agency in spaces previously denied them or in those where they were usually the subjects of white management. Meanwhile, the emotionally charged atmosphere during performance rendered these locations unsafe for the state to enter and reassert control. Thus, street performance hinted towards the Freudian sense of the *unheimlich*. Indeed, as suggested by Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs's discussion of Australian theatre, a place of performance was created that remained

> at once "ours" and "theirs" […] so that one can never be completely in possession of place: one is always (dis)possessed, in the sense that neither possession nor dispossession is a fully recognisable category. (1998, 138)

The South African white population was excluded from possessing what was at least officially theirs to control. Consequently the oppressed, through new forms of performance culture, created and appropriated public spaces that challenged apartheid social order and suggested a new situation. These zones, temporarily liberated by a wide performance culture, were new public spaces. They were subject to African agency and self-expression and suggested the foundations of a democratic South Africa (Kirkwood 1987).

Symbolic Theatre

The preceding sections have consistently shown how new public spaces were created by a performance culture which, though increasingly political in tone, remained important on an aesthetic level. But, as the 1980s unfolded, this relationship between politics and culture became even more inverted. It was not just culture that became political. Politics itself became almost cultural: it adopted the symbolic purchase of theatre and became increasingly performative.

Violence, for example, shows how politics was performed as theatre. Franziska Ruedi (2012) has previously raised ideas of audience and communication during moments of violence. She suggests fire played a role in boundary formation by explicitly marking out outsiders and warning against collaboration. This, therefore, can be interpreted in a similar way to theatrical performance. Smoke creates a clearly visible and located boundary between the actors in the violence and the audience. Additionally, it serves as a tool of political communication and method of altering behaviour. To those 'on stage' - those who have had their house bombed - attempts are made to chase them away, whilst the audience - nearby residents - are simultaneously warned about the dangers of collaboration.

A further aspect of fire's theatrical nature can be seen in a brief anecdote offered by the poet Mzi Mahola. Discussing his training with the ANC in Lesotho he reveals his experiments with petrol bombs where he attempted to give an aesthetic beauty, fitting of the theatre, to violence:

> I used to get some strange inflammable liquids so that the flame would give a
> bright red colour or blue colour and if it hit the bus – hey! – it made a beautiful
> scene. (1994, 49)

Mahola thus not only suggests the beauty of righteous violence, but by linking violence

with dramatic spectacle, elevates fire beyond the normalised status it was prescribed during apartheid. Instead, used as theatre, fire gains an almost absurd characteristic to match that of South Africa's repressive regime.

A second example of theatricality's symbolic purchase and its increased resonance with political discourse has been discussed by Belinda Bozzoli (2004) who conceives of the common practice of mass funerals and night vigils in Alexandria as political theatre. Funerals were frequently manipulated from private mourning into a political performance designed to meet previously defined goals. Improvised performance was mixed with scripted parts, scheduled direction, and fusions of poetry and music. Moreover, props and costumes drawn from the liberation struggle were used to temporarily reinforce an African identity on township streets (Bozzoli 2004, 211-3), thus hinting towards ideas of new public space. Additionally, these performances also included the prologue and epilogue of theatre. Funerals were preceded by mass marches. Funeral cars travelled the streets with megaphones to announce the funeral and call people to attend (216). Night vigils concluded events. And, although the religious aspect of Christian prayer and hymn so imperative at 'ordinary' urban funerals remained present, it was not afforded the same prominence. It was politics as theatre that came to dominate.

Many involved justified the politicisation of these funerals as true acts of resistance. These funerals celebrated life and symbolised the people's irrepressible desire to struggle on despite the costs. Yet, more personal considerations cannot be ignored. Such funerals remorselessly hijacked deeply emotional and private occasions for public political gain. Many families even decided against holding vigils so as not to provoke confrontation with police or 'comrades'. Consequently, they were often left unsettled because of the importance placed on the correct procedures of mourning to

'allow the living to get on with living' (Hay 2011, 298). Just as a good life was desired, so too was a good death. But was hijacking these funerals to bring in a sense of performance really necessary to establish funerals as a new public space with its associated characteristics? Or could it have been achieved without?

Michelle Hay (2011) notes how funeral practice in urban areas symbolically syncretised African and Christian belief systems whilst creating a sense of unity that removed the differences pervading every other aspect of apartheid life. Most members of the community offered condolences at the deceased's home and joined in silent procession to the cemetery. And, more importantly, 'ordinary' funerals themselves signified a silent defiance to continue and cherish life. They showed the personal could not be corrupted from above like so much public history. Hay arguably describes one of the most profound but unspectacular incidences of African agency: '[funerals] seek to capture a lost life or a lost world, to hold it dear, to understand the role that person played in life and perhaps to add meaning to it' (2011, 299). Thus, the funeral space regardless of its overtly political and performative nature, helped created a new public space; one of agency, community, and personal expression.

Towards New Public Space

The 1980s proved a decisive decade in South African history. The progressively violent challenges to Nationalist rule did not bring about apartheid's fall, but a liberated future became imaginable. The growing performance culture allowed those marginalised by the state to temporarily ascribe their own authority and agency, to challenge previous perceptions, establish their own voice, and create new ideas of public space. Though the above pages have only painted broad-brush strokes of each line of cultural development, this need for inclusivity is demanded by the narrowing of the supposed dichotomous

relationships between art and politics and between cultural forms at a time when all exhibited a similar sense of performance. A dialogue was created with the audience that saw culture perform the lives and concerns of the community, yet simultaneously mobilise them to change their situation.

Such was the success of these mobilising techniques that their appeal stretched beyond the mental and spiritual aspects of personal liberation of previous literatures and instead took a very public, political, and physical hold. Culture gained a spatial power that severely threatened the apartheid order and created new spaces of public meaning and dialogue that suggested the emerging outline of democracy. Building on and continuing the mutually reinforcing relationships between both politics and art and politics and performances, 1980s South Africa began to map new ideas of public spaces and establish new performance repertoires that are still exploited today.

[i] For the relationship between democracy and public space see Don Mitchell (2003) and Nadine Gordimer in Rita Barnard (2007, 44).

[ii] Though the O'Malley Files (2014) discuss FOSATU's decline and COSATU's subsequent rise at length, the number of members for each remain hard to determine.

[iii] Examples include Workshop '71, Fugard's Serpent Players, and Kente's musical theatre.

[iv] Saths Cooper was the first name on the charge sheet. The others were Strini Moodley, Aubrey Mokoape, Mosiuoa Lekota, Nkenkwe Nkomo, Zithulele Cindi, Muntu Myeza, Pandelani Nefolovhodwe, and Kaborane Sedibe.

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