

Decolonising the Humanities: Reimagining Black Intellectual Life and Personhood in Southern African Contexts

[REVIEW ARTICLE]

Foundational African Writers: Peter Abrahams, Noni Jabavu, Sibusiso Nyembezi & Es'kia Mphahlele edited by Bhekizizwe Peterson, Khwezi Mkhize and Makhosazana Xaba. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2022.

Abstract

This review article explores possibilities for transdisciplinary entanglements between the disciplines of critical psychology and literary criticism through a reading of the volume, 'Foundational African Writers', edited by Bhekizizwe Peterson, Khwezi Mkhize and Makhosazana Xaba. In this article, 'Foundational African Writers' is approached as a distillation of Peterson's investment in excavating the world-making activities, writing lives and activities of ordinary people as a central dimension of the project to decolonise the Humanities. As this edited volume attests, Peterson's creative and critical oeuvre continues to provoke thinking about the ways in which the reading of the African literary archive can assist in the wider project of decolonising and re-imagining intellectual and creative history in the Global South while also providing opportunities for new modes of thinking about personhood and psychic life in contexts of precarity, intergenerational trauma and economic exclusion.

Introduction

Foundational African Writers is clearly grounded in the capacious, interdisciplinary, ethical and imaginative scholarship of Bhekizizwe Peterson himself, particularly his investment in expansive genealogical frameworks of literary-cultural analysis – the long eye of history and

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the crossways, byways and forkways of Black intellectual and cultural life. As a means of both honouring and exemplifying Peterson's intellectual project, the book extends a further invitation to think historically, to trace connections, lineages, echoes, dissonances and lines of flight, across both local particulars and global currents and across pre-colonial, nineteenth-century, segregationist, apartheid and post-independence periods, while also revealing the unexpected insights to be gained through the transgression of conventional intellectual boundaries and the contemplation of imaginative alternatives. In its attention to embodied subjectivities, material contexts, storied lives and everyday interactions, the collection does important work in re-centring the significance of African writing as a mode of life- and world-making.

Decolonising Intellectual History: Thinking in a Genealogical Mode

The editors' decision to place the diverse writing worlds of four twentieth-century African writers within a single frame is a provocation to think dialogically, generationally and genealogically; to think in more focused ways about the complex material and social contexts in which these writers were active and to trace precursors, afterlives, interactions and influences. The genealogical perspective, with its characteristically wide-ranging and telescopic focus on the long history of intellectual expression and social being, makes it possible to theorise the present as historical contingency – a present which is imagined not through the optics of newness or rupture but rather in terms of continuities, departures, ongoing tensions, repetitions and recursions.

The collection of essays is a call to understand the importance of these writers as 'inaugurating' figures in the Black intellectual tradition, part of a long continuum of intellectual-cultural engagement. It also does them the honour of engaging with them critically, not as fixed monuments in a reified corpus but as departure points for continuing debate. The centenarian framing foregrounds a shared scene of writing, a shared historical moment, a shared set of incitements and a shared affective domain; what Simon Gikandi in the Foreword to the book describes as writing amidst the "detritus of colonial history" (2002, p. xi). This dialogical framing and close attention to historical context adds immensely to our understanding of Black writing lives and personhood in segregationist and apartheid South Africa (or exile from it), its conditions of possibility, its informing contexts, its anxieties, tensions, precarities, and infrastructural constraints as well as its varied shapes and creative permutations.

Of course, the desire to locate 'beginnings', to identify 'traditions' and to recognise 'foundationality' is always tricky: a necessary gesture of homage and a crucial move in the writing of literary histories, it is also a "pedagogical gesture" (Goswami Choudhury, 2023, p. 86) that accords authority and significance, one which demarcates a scholarly field, assigns value, and projects a network of continuities and influences. In the South African context, this gesture has been grounded in a desire to seek out the "continuity of

black South African literature” (Couzens, 1974, p. 11) in a context in which such lineages were frequently broken by violence and exile. As the history of Black newspapers and periodicals attest, the decolonial project has taken primary shape as the construction of alternative literary lineages and the surfacing of a Black-centred aesthetic. Central to this endeavour is the deconstruction of the idea of intellectual life as an elite practice in opposition to more ‘popular’ modes.¹ *Foundational African Writers* continues this legacy by reimagining Black intellectual history as an everyday, interactive practice and by inserting these traditions into mainstream scholarship as part of a wider attempt to read official histories against the grain.

On the question of foundationality, the editors are careful to complicate notions of origin by foregrounding the equal significance of earlier aesthetic and intellectual traditions in Southern Africa, thus foregrounding wider connections and cultural maps between, for example, the isiXhosa newspaper poetry of Nonstitsi Mqwetho, the literary and polemical writings of Sol T. Plaatje, the novels of Thomas Mofolo, the work of H.I.E. and R.R.R. Dhlomo and, further back, the literary importance of nineteenth-century newspapers (Jordan, 1973). In this sense the collection also speaks back to several earlier literary genealogies by A.C. Jordan (1973), Tim Couzens (1986) and Ntongela Masilela (2013). As Obi Nwakanma argues in his chapter, the question of foundationality is also complicated by adjacent spaces of literary-cultural efflorescence such as the Mbari Club in 1960s Ibadan, a perspective which also highlights Es’kia Mphahlele’s foundational role in materialising connections across several “epicentres of cultural action” including the ‘Sophiatown Renaissance’, the Mbari Club and the Chemchemi Club in Kenya (in Peterson et al., 2022, p. 68). What is crucial in this volume’s synthesizing impetus is the space it creates for exploring affinities and connections amongst these various cultural traditions while also leaving room for disarticulations, failure and gaps.

As James Ogude argues in his chapter, this collection is also a partial answer to an increasing trend to dismiss early African writers as narrowly nationalist and to resuscitate their value and remember them anew as political commentators, decolonial thinkers, cultural brokers and cultural translators, who were working on the cusp of different aesthetic, political and intellectual traditions; writers who were impelled by their complex, entangled circumstances to forge new genres, new forms of subjectivity and new modes of political articulation and avenues of collaboration. The focus in this volume on literary genealogies – along with the wider scene of African print cultures and its dominant aesthetic-political debates – presents a model of reading African literature (and personhood) that is contextually rich, attentive to detail, conscious of lineages and material spaces and closely attuned to the literary and intellectual publics within which these writers circulated and which they also helped to produce.

1 For a very early example, see R. V. Selope Thema’s “Xhosa Nation Prepares the Way” *Bantu World* (15 October 1932), an article which explores the legacy of the late nineteenth-century Xhosa intelligentsia.

Thinking in a genealogical mode leads to both a reinforcement of connections and influences that are already fairly well established (such as those between the writers, Peter Abrahams and Es'kia Mphahlele) while also encouraging a widening of the frame through the inclusion of voices, contexts and writing lives which have been marginalised and overlooked. Through its focus on the writing worlds of Sibusiso Nyembezi, who wrote mainly in isiZulu, for example, the collection does important work in re-centring the intellectual, cultural and psychic lives of those without the option of mobility. The book thus extends scholarly parameters beyond the dominant story of transnational migration and exilic identities, as well as offering new paradigms for reading the rural hinterland against more dominant preoccupations with Black urbanity. The renewed interest in Nyembezi's work, all originally published in isiZulu, opens a local discussion about what the inclusion of African-language texts might mean for established understandings of the African literary corpus, when the emergence of African literature might be located and why African language texts have been excluded in this process. The collection overturns a longstanding linguistic bifurcation in African literary scholarship (Marzagora, 2015a and 2015b; Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ, 2018), thus also taking steps to address "Africa's missing literary history" (Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ, cited by Mhlambi in Peterson, et al., 2022, p. 174). In the South African context, the relative neglect of S.E.K. Mqhayi's poetry and prose works, John Dube's *Insila ka Shaka* (1928) and A.C. Jordan's *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya* (1940) serve as representative examples.²

Sikhumbuzo Mngadi's engagement with Nyembezi's novels tests out some of the implications of this shift in thinking, asking to what extent the inclusion of African-language literature might reframe assumptions about African encounters with colonial modernity, and how it might disrupt established periodisations, categories and aesthetic values. Innocentia Mhlambi's reading of Nyembezi's novels highlights his "creative use of the oral archive" (in Peterson et al., 2022, p. 174), his incorporation of a "diverse range of aesthetic renditions that complicate the relationship between oral cultures and written forms" (in Peterson et al., 2022, p. 173) and opens up new possibilities for exploring the oral/written interface in African literature. The new attention given to Nyembezi's work also troubles stock assumptions about apartheid publishing forums as those which inevitably conditioned a conservative or uncritical politics.

Attention to Nyembezi's novels and literary criticism signals the importance of the mode of recovery and revision that marks much of this volume's critical orientation as well as its decolonial impetus. As Athambile Masola's chapter highlights, this entails a concerted effort to tease out the paradox of a writer of pioneering literary significance who has been relegated to footnote status, highlighting the conundrum of being present but *akabonwa*/not seen (in Peterson et al., 2022, p. 99). The extended focus on the writing

2 Bhekizizwe Peterson's chapter on the black historical novel in the *Cambridge Companion to South African Literature* is one example of attempts to read these texts back into the established canon.

worlds of Noni Jabavu, taken up by Masola, Hugo Canham, Makhosazana Xaba and Tina Steiner is a particular strength, and amounts to an important revision of established understandings of South African intellectual and literary history, the place of women writers and the implications of education, cultural and social capital and mobility. These engagements with Jabavu's work – which also foreground a multi-modal writing life encompassing journalism, creative writing and editing – provide the impetus for a more integrated genealogy of Black women's writing lives. They extend an invitation to place Jabavu's writing in dialogue with some of her contemporaries – Miriam Tlali, Bessie Head, Emma Mashinini, Ellen Kuzwayo, Lauretta Ngcobo and Phyllis Ntantala – while also drawing potential links to black women's writing traditions in the United Kingdom, which was the place from which Jabavu produced most of her work. With respect to the unearthing of women's writing histories, the volume also explores new critical methodologies: in Masola's case, the turn to indigenous frames of reading for the interpretation of African literature and, in Xaba's case, the reading of Jabavu's writing via the adjacent migrant trajectories of women such as Phyllis Wheatley, Una Marson, Beryl Gilroy and Margaret Busby.

As suggested, this has implications for conventional understandings of African literature's 'foundations' and the ways in which it has been defined, what has fallen by the wayside and why. If the collection can be said to retrieve a missing part of African cultural and literary history, what new insights can be gained into the politics of remembrance and forgetting and the related question of canonisation? In this respect, the volume aligns with a more focused interest in current scholarship in the makings and elisions of the African literary canon and the publishing of African literature, thus also drawing potential connections to the Western canon-debates of the 1980s. By focusing attention on questions of gender, class and language in canonical constructions of African literature, the volume problematises existing assumptions and configurations of the field and solicits new readings. Not least of this, as Gikandi (2022) argues, is the "long overdue examination of the role played by black South African writers in the making of African letters" (p. xi). In this sense, the volume adds substance to earlier questions about what writing worlds come into view when we step back from assumptions about Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as a 'foundational' text (Chrisman, 2005; Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ, 2018). An obvious case in the Southern African context is Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* first published in Sesotho in 1925, republished in its first English translation by Oxford University Press in 1931, translated into French in 1942 and published by Gallimard and subsequently adapted in the English-Readers' Library Series and then translated into German, Italian and Kiswahili. *Chaka's* entry into Anglophone, Europhone and African publishing circuits, and its myriad transnational circulations, points to the novel's significance as a pioneering transnational African text, one which predates Achebe's novel by some distance.

Thinking Across Disciplines

This is a collection that falls somewhat outside of conventional scholarly scripts and academic protocols. This is partly to do with the fact that these writing lives are read through a range of disciplinary lenses – literary criticism, narrative psychology, visual studies, cultural studies and historical studies. As the editors acknowledge, this echoes the interdisciplinary, boundary-crossing nature of so much Black intellectual and creative work in the early to mid-twentieth century and of the centenarian writers themselves. A particular strength of the volume therefore is its engagement with the “difficulties and possibilities of interdisciplinary thinking” (Bradbury, in Peterson et al., 2022, p. 237). The inclusion of perspectives derived from psycho-analytic and socio-cognitive frameworks (Njovane, Bradbury, Soudien) amplify more conventional literary readings through their emphasis on personhood, subjectivity, the psychological dimensions of story-telling and the significance of memory, displacement, childhood, home and place. In this way, they draw attention to the many points at which life writing and psychoanalysis overlap and coalesce. Jill Bradbury’s interest in the reading and writing process as a mode of “(un)learning” is premised in part on the value of “thinking about life as a story and thinking through story as the analysis of life” (in Peterson et al., 2022, p. 245). Further points of disciplinary intersection are explored in Ann-Maria Makhulu’s reading of literary lives against the story of Black transnational mobility, as well as in Thato Thipe’s chapter on the quotidian practices of domestic township photography and their role in resisting the historical pathologizing of blackness. The collection’s openness to a range of outcomes, not predetermined in advance – the sense of unpredictability and of journeying along new pathways through a confluence of positions and ideas – is strongly reminiscent of the non-teleological, open-ended and exploratory quality of Peterson’s scholarship itself.

Writing Lives and Histories: Genres/Acts of Writing

Foundational African Writers charts some of the central thematics of twentieth-century Black articulation: precolonial cosmologies, the impact of colonialism and apartheid, the encounter with colonial modernity, cultural syncretism, questions of identity, gender, race, decolonisation, pan-Africanism, diaspora and the violence of the postcolony. It also extends the existing scholarship on the distinctive “acts of writing” (Peterson, 2008, p. 80) that emerged in colonial and apartheid contexts; highlighting in particular the emergence of various experiments with form and as well as the significance of social and cultural capital in making of a writing life. (See also Canham’s chapter, 2022.) Of interest here are the ways in which attention to aesthetic form might assist in re-casting dominant understandings of personhood and psychic life in the Southern African context: what, for instance, does the emergence of new genres tell us about changing forms of subjectivity and acts of self-making? How does literature’s focus on ‘structures of feeling’ bring new ideas about embodied experience, temporality, situatedness and relationality to the fore?

The collection underscores the dominance of the retrospective autobiographical mode and the first-person travelogue in African letters, literary forms that work in the liminal space between self and society; forms in which psychic life and social reality are kept in perpetual, unresolved tension. Closely allied to this is the dominance of inscriptions of contemporary Black urban life; the preoccupation with realist representations of African urban identities as a counter to apartheid reification of rurality on the one hand and missionary moralising on the other. As the collection suggests, this leads to what might be seen as the emblematic genre of the Black township story, the literature of the city, the literature of the street. Of course, the new attention to the work of Nyembezi also complicates these assumptions by drawing attention to the ongoing literary resonance of the rural hinterland, as much “in the shadows of British imperialism” (Mhlambi, in Peterson et al., 2022, p. 171) as the racialised South African city.

Still on the question of form, the collection draws attention to the characteristic transgression of generic boundaries and the telescoping or amalgamation of different forms, thus highlighting the kind of linguistic and generic experiments that are typically fostered in the colonial contact zone. Also evident is the extent to which the ambiguities and tensions of colonial and apartheid contexts are registered in literary form itself; and the ways in which the inhabiting of multiple genres – and the spaces in between – was the rule rather than the exception. Alongside the well-known examples of Sol T. Plaatje’s *Mhudi* and *Native Life in South Africa* and Jabavu’s experiments in ethnographic memoir, explored in this volume, one could also add H.I.E. Dhlomo’s early story “Experiment in Colour” (a surviving fragment of a lost novel manuscript) which fused speculative fiction and social realism; as well the many entangled, multi-generic productions emanating from Lovedale Press (Sandwith, 2021). This pervasive aesthetics of amalgamation and borrowing reveals the desire, as Ogude says, to link this writing to international political and intellectual currents. These writers both “referenced a local resource base” such as orature (thus placing oral and written texts in dialogue) but also “gestured elsewhere for new literary templates forged in similar contexts” (Ogude, in Peterson et al., 2022, p. 27). In this respect, African foundational writers are recollected in the present as ‘voyagers out’; as those who sought complex forms of cultural transaction and interaction. The imperative to “navigate through Europe’s linguistic, literary and formal legacies” (Robolin, in Peterson et al., 2022, p. 403) is evident in the continued resonance of the Bible, Shakespeare and Romantic and Victorian poets and well as in the prominence of citational practices more generally. These ongoing engagements with colonial culture fostered critical reading dispositions and the widespread practice of reading against the grain. As contemporary activist-intellectuals such as Ben Kies and A. C. Jordan emphasised, these borrowing tactics deliberately eschewed the conventional view of culture as racial inheritance and accessed a more inclusive principle of cultural acquisition and appropriation based on proximity, contiguity and demand. The citational aesthetic would, of course, come under increasing scrutiny in the Black Consciousness

period as writers were urged to dispense with white patronage in all its forms and forge new aesthetic and political pathways.

As feminist scholars have argued, the idiosyncratic, creative and often subversive negotiation of established generic boundaries is especially true of women's writing. The feminist re-readings of Jabavu's work presented in this volume offer a rich confirmation of these claims. As Masola demonstrates, Jabavu's writing subverts the teleological drive and monolingualism of the memoir form by foregrounding fragmentation and linguistic experimentation. In similar fashion, Steiner highlights Jabavu's "multi-directional and multi-faceted interweaving of personal and public reflections" (in Peterson et al., 2022, p. 281), her sidestepping of established epistemological frameworks and her rewriting of the travelogue/memoir as an "intergenerational conversation" (p. 279) and "kaleidoscopic" form (p. 293). Xaba highlights the practice of subversive appropriation with respect to Jabavu's reinvention of the conventions of established male-dominated genres and authoritative forms such as the Editorial Letter. Against the "all-knowing" editorial tone, Xaba (in Peterson et al., 2022, p. 362) argues, Jabavu privileges an intimate mode of address, an informal register and a self-reflexive, even self-conscious, writing style which draws attention to both the act of writing and the editorial decision-making process itself.

This collection's expanded genealogical scope brings an important missing dimension into view, namely the significance and traction of the satirical mode as an overlooked form of counter-cultural literary engagement in Southern African. With particular reference to Innocentia Mhlambi's reading of Nyembezi's satirical novel, *Inkinsela yase Mngungundlovu* (1961), the genealogical perspective opens the possibility of tracing a longer black satirical writing tradition through oral praise poetry, R.R.R. Dhlomo's "Roamer" column in *Bantu World*, Mphahlele's "Rabelais and his World" column in *The Voice*, Alex la Guma's "Up my Alley" published in *New Age* in the 1950s and Casey Motsisi's "On the Beat" which appeared in *Drum* the 1960s. Mhlambi's discussion of Nyembezi's novel brings this long satirical thread into even clearer focus. What this perspective makes evident is the singular importance of newspaper literature for a fuller understanding of the genealogies and cross-currents of African letters. As indicated, Mhlambi's detailed exploration of Nyembezi's novel provokes a potentially fascinating line of inquiry into the connections between R.R.R. Dhlomo's newspaper journalism and Nyembezi's novels and the influence that his popular Roamer columns may have had on succeeding generations.

Tracing connections (and discontinuities) across formal and informal scenes of writing has the potential to shift contemporary understandings of South African intellectual history in important ways. But it is a practice that, as Nwakanma, Mhlambi, Peterson and Ogude also suggest, can be extended to writing cultures across the African continent. See

Mhlambi's invitation to read Nyembezi's critique of African elites as a forerunner of the novels of postcolonial disillusionment (epitomised in the writing of Achebe and Armah) and Nwakanma's interest in the stark contrast between South African preoccupations with the black township as a "referential symbol" as opposed to the West African preoccupations with the recovery of the "mystic inside" (in Peterson et al., 2022, p. 55). In similar fashion, Peterson's chapter illuminates the strong obligation felt by South African writers to assert their humanity while for West African writers this is never in question (in Peterson et al., 2022, p. 340).

Brought into View: Recollecting African Writers in the Present

The commemorative nature of the collection prompts questions about how these writers are recollected and read from a twenty-first century perspective, what aspects of their material situation, writing practice and human life are brought into view and what is thereby revealed about the psychic and political investments of critical scholarship in the present. A dominant trope in the volume's collective remembrance is that of border-crossing. This is understood not only in relation to material histories of mobility, migration and exile but also with respect to the writers' entanglements with adjacent aesthetic, intellectual and political traditions, a location which prompts both a relational and transgressive poetics. The figurative and literal border-crossings that so many of these chapters lay out evince an awareness of overlapping territories and intertwined projects. They are evident too in the efforts to map the intricate material and discursive circuits and forms of exchange that constituted the mid-twentieth century pan-Africanist project in all of its African, diasporic, conceptual and political dimensions. Chris Ouma's engagement with the Chemchemi cultural club and its monthly publication *Chemchemi Newsletter* adds new detail to the particular shape and institutional forms that pan-African thinking took in this period while also reinforcing Mphahlele's central role in the curation of these new "geographies of continental Pan-Africanism" (in Peterson et al., 2022, p. 304). Against more pessimistic Cold War readings of this period in African history, Ouma points to the significance of these networks, and the cultural publics that they convened, as forms of counter-worlding which also inscribed alternative circuits of value. Ouma's reading of *Chemchemi Newsletter* confirms the importance of little magazines and similar publications during this period in fostering "decolonised cultural citizenship" (in Peterson et al., 2022, p. 313) and in orienting readers towards a pan-African and diasporic imaginary through various projects of affiliation and the sharing of ideas.

A transnational approach to African literature underscores the fact that South African intellectual and aesthetic traditions have long been in dialogue with those located elsewhere. For African foundational writers these include nineteenth-century Ethiopianism; Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement; the emancipation and 'progress' of African-American slaves in the United States; Black diasporic solidarities spurred by Italy's invasion of Abyssinia in 1935; twentieth-century pan-Africanism; the

New Negro Movement in the USA, the Harlem Renaissance, anti-colonial struggles in India, the US Civil Rights Movement and later the 1960s the Black Arts Movement and the aesthetic debates which this generated (Robolin, in Peterson et al., 2022). In tracing some of these connections, the volume adds detail to Brent Hayes Edwards' reading of the periodical press as a "practice of diaspora" (2003, p. 115). Peterson's interest in the role of *Drum* magazine in the creation of a pan-Africanist imaginary, as well as the new attention he gives to its material circulation across the continent, points to *Drum's* overlooked significance in the "annals of pan-Africanism" (in Peterson et al., 2022, p. 334). His return in this discussion to the resonant Biblical phrase, "Ethiopia shall stretch out her hand to God" Psalm 68:33 – a powerful synecdoche for Africa's return/resistance – reinforces a fascinating genealogy of South African Ethiopianist reference which can be traced through Tiyo Soga (1865), Pixley ka Seme (1906), Nontsizi Mqwetho (1924, 1925), Stanley Silwana (1935), S.E.K. Mqhayi (1935), Shep Maloy (1936) and Robert Sobukwe (1949).³

Alongside the pan-Africanist ambitions of both *Chemchemi Newsletter* and *Drum* magazine can be placed the parallel but separate project of Ronald Segal's *Africa South* (later *Africa South in Exile*), an independent publication, launched in 1958, which continued into the early 1960s when Segal went into exile in the United Kingdom. *Africa South*, which drew on contributors such as Phyllis Ntantala, Basil Davidson, Joe Matthews, A.C. Jordan and Nelson Mandela, was noteworthy for bringing some of the main locations of global racial injustice and resistance (South Africa, the United States and Britain) into intimate, contrapuntal relation, thus drawing in some of the main vectors of the classic pan-Africanist configuration. It is an impetus that frames the political and aesthetic purview of many other contemporary and antecedent publications, particularly those periodicals, like *Umsebenzi*, *Fighting Talk* and *New Age*, which positioned themselves on the political Left. A genealogical reading of South African periodical print culture reveals the centrality of diasporic, pan-Africanist and internationalist imaginaries for the framing of political and cultural questions in this period, a trend which continues into the 1980s in publications like *Staffrider* and *New Classic*.

Khwezi Mkhize takes up the impress of pan-Africanist thinking on the trends and preoccupations in African literary criticism in this period, with a particular focus on Mphahlele's *The African Image*, serialised in part in *Fighting Talk* in 1957, and subsequently published by Faber and Faber in 1962. Mkhize's engagement with the various iterations of Mphahlele's study highlights the shaping force of material and intellectual contexts in the making of a Black-centred aesthetic. Also instructive is Mkhize's reading of *The African Image* not "in the light of postcolonial theory" but rather as an early example of postcolonial critique itself (in Peterson et al., 2022, p. 273), signalled most obviously in Mphahlele's interest in the politics of representation. These

3 For details of some of these references see Sandwith (2021) and Johnson (2022).

early concerns with the violence of racialised representation resonate very strongly with the literary-cultural polemics of several contemporary magazines – *Trek*, *The Voice*, *Torch*, *Fighting Talk* and *Spark* – thus situating Mphahlele’s interventions within a wider context of aesthetic and cultural debate in South Africa in the early apartheid period. Genealogies of African literary criticism are also the concern of Crain Soudien’s chapter which argues for the need to find new rubrics and new frames of reference for the analysis of African literature. Against the general trend to read the encounter with African modernity as fraught and ambivalent – a reading that places particular stress on a divided subjectivity – Soudien proposes the rubric of living and writing “across difference” (in Peterson et al., 2022, p. 129) and an alternative view of postcolonial subjectivities as characterised by fluidity rather than fracture.

In tension with the volume’s interest in Black internationalist solidarities and imagined affiliations are the repeated tropes of fault-line, dissonance and failure; the volume’s concern with the difficulty of connection, the inability to speak across gaps and the moments where pan-Africanist solidarities are pulled up short. While Steiner draws attention to gender as a “key contradicting factor which highlights the limitations of the articulation of Pan-African unity” (in Peterson et al., 2022, p. 290), Ouma places emphasis on the fragility of diasporic dialogue in the face of calculated “xenophobic and ethnocentric statecraft” (in Peterson et al., 2022, p. 317). Stéphane Robolin’s chapter on Mphahlele’s interactions with the US Black Arts Movements, in turn, centres on Mphahlele’s acute awareness of the “conjunctions and disjunctions of black transnationalisms” (in Peterson et al., 2022, p. 398) and, returning to the question of analytical frames of reference, the particular sticking point of the singularity and exclusivity of the notion of the “black aesthetic” versus an “integrationist aesthetic of entanglement” (in Peterson et al., 2022, p. 403). Peterson’s reading of pan-Africanist fault-lines shifts attention to the pragmatic historical value of political mobilisation along “racial lines” and how this tended to downplay “questions of economics and class” and the “extractive economies of colonialism” in particular (in Peterson et al., 2022, p. 344). The volume’s return to the pan-Africanist project registers a dual interest in opening up the space to explore transnational Black solidarities while also highlighting their fragility and tenuousness. The volume gestures towards an alternative perspective in which the commensurable and the incommensurable can be held in uncomfortable proximity. This attempt to assert links in the face of disjuncture remains a crucial political project, particularly as a means of resisting what Amitav Ghosh calls the “partitioning” of “intertwined histories” (1992, p. 339) favoured by the “enforcers of History” (1992, p. 342); the ongoing attempt to efface long-standing connections and crossways in the service of purity and singularity.

Working in tandem with this thinking with and beyond nationalist methodologies is the continued value of foundational African writers as ongoing resources for postcolonial

and decolonial thinking, a focus which is confirmed by the disproportionate place occupied by Peter Abrahams' *Wreath for Udomo* (discussed by Ogude, Peterson, Thorpe and Collis-Buthelezi), a pattern of emphasis which confirms that the early novel of postcolonial disillusionment remains a fertile site for the exploration of some of "the major contradictions and problems that confronted the nationalist elite in the aftermath of independence" (Ogude, in Peterson et al., 2022, p. 38). Anthea Thorpe's re-reading of *Wreath for Udomo* highlights its unresolved mix of romantic overcoming and tragic foreclosure as well as its significance for a reading of African and pan-African "genealogies of anti-colonialism" (in Peterson et al., p. 391). Victoria Collis-Buthelezi's illuminating comparative reading of African and Caribbean postcolonial contexts (via Abrahams' *Wreath for Udomo* and *This Island Now*) foregrounds both the specificities of particular postcolonial contexts and the question of gender for the reading of postcolonial futures.

Print Cultures and Periodicals in Social Space

As this volume suggests, a decolonial and genealogical approach is attentive to the wider material, social and cultural field within which these writers were situated and within which their work took shape. It draws attention to the institutional and informal infrastructures, print networks and social spaces which facilitated and conditioned the intellectual and cultural work of the period. There is ample evidence of the role of newspaper and periodical culture in particular as one of the chief conditions of possibility for African literature at this time: its role as alternative publishing venue, shared scene of writing and convenor of a vibrant multi-lingual Black public sphere in which political and aesthetic issues were debated side by side and new subjectivities forged. The attraction of the newspaper for emerging African writers is easy to understand. As a publishing venue which bypassed orthodox sites of publication such as the colonial mission and the metropolitan-based colonial institution, the periodical press was less subject to attempts at censorship or intrusive editing, publishing delays or outright rejection than more formal institutions. It was also a space which encouraged more informal, more experimental, possibly less compliant but certainly more reader-oriented and accessible forms of writing. Mphahlele is a key figure in this respect – writing in *The Voice* magazine, *Fighting Talk*, *Drum* as well as *Transition*, *Black Orpheus* and *Chemchemi*. To this tradition can be added Nontsizi Mqwetho's praise poems published in *Umteteli wa Bantu* in the 1920s, S.E.K. Mqhayi's isiXhosa poetry and Peter Abrahams' English poetry published in *Bantu World* in the 1930s, R.R.R. Dhlomo's stories and satires published in *The Sjobok* and *Bantu World*, H.I.E. Dhlomo's essays published in *Umteteli*, *Bantu World* and *Ilanga lase Natal* as well as the many writers and critics who appeared in *Fighting Talk* and *Drum*. Within these informal print contexts, as many chapters demonstrate, African writers frequently took on the roles of cultural brokers and agents of various kinds while also using the freedom of the newspaper form to write across different genres.

Equally important for a genealogical perspective on African literature, as Ouma's chapter confirms, is the intricate network of cultural clubs, political organisations, sites of protest, book clubs, theatre groups and debating societies for the movement of texts, the circulation of ideas and the establishment of alternative intellectual publics and sites of cultural consumption. This focus on social space and ephemeral networks invites a re-theorisation of cultural-intellectual activities as concrete, material endeavours involving human bodies, physical spaces, material objects, social groups and co-operative work. In this sense, the project of decolonising the Humanities entails closer attention to the intricacies of urban and rural colonial space – its material infrastructures, complex crossings and entanglements, the ways in which it was appropriated and the forms of personhood and modes of interaction it manifested. Following these routes, it becomes possible to establish that an early collection of Peter Abrahams' poetry entitled *Here Friend* (which likely formed the basis of *A Black Man Speaks of Freedom*) was read and discussed in Communist Party circles in the 1930s and 40s.⁴ In a similar period (extending into the early 1970s), The Bantu Men's Social Centre, located in Eloff Street Extension on the margins of the Johannesburg Central Business District, was the home of the Carnegie-sponsored 'Non-European Library' (where Abrahams first encountered the work of W.E.B. du Bois) and the regular meeting space for both the Bantu Dramatic Society (Peterson, 2008, pp. 140-150), the African National Congress and the Gamma Sigma Club where, amongst other events, patrons heard lectures on literature by African-American educationalist Walter White and R.V. Selope Thema (Couzens, 1985). The socio-cultural mapping of colonial Johannesburg could also be extended to the steps of the Johannesburg City Hall (scene of many political protests, fistfights and rallies); the Bantu Studies Department at the University of the Witwatersrand in nearby Braamfontein (where Nyembezi worked as lecturer in the late 1940s); as well as to the Gandhi Hall in Fordsburg, the site of the inaugural conference of the Non-European Arts Congress in 1946 and the location of several Communist Party rallies and radical plays performed by the Bantu People's Theatre in the 1940s. Also important were the lively offices of the *Bantu World* newspaper located outside of the city centre in Perth Street and even further West, the cultural organisations which flourished in Orlando township in the 1940s including the Syndicate of African Artists, the Donaldson Community Centre and *The Voice* newspaper.

Cape Town's print and social networks can be traced through the Communist-inspired People's Club which held its gatherings in Commercial Street; the meetings of the New Era Fellowship held at the Stakesby Lewis Hostel in District Six (which Abrahams attended in the 1930s); the Grand Parade in the centre of town (site of second-hand booksellers, political protests and general grandstanding), the offices of the Communist Party at 22 Hanover Street and the debates and lectures held at the Cape Literary and

4 Communist Party of South Africa Issuances, 1937-43, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, California.

Debating Society located at the Hyman Liberman Institute. This brief sampling of the social and material spaces in which writers, artists, intellectuals and activists in the early twentieth-century, might have congregated and crossed paths is a tentative gesture towards an account of African intellectual history which is attentive to the impact of spatial locations on the formation of cultural communities, inter-personal links and the flow of ideas.⁵

Publishing as Social Practice

I want to end with a few brief reflections on the publishing contexts of African literature, a topic to which the volume alludes but does not address explicitly. A return to the publishing archive, and the social-material contexts in which it took shape, foregrounds the layered and complex processes through which African literature was brought into print, revealing how external mediators such as publishers and translators influenced literary representations and, in turn, shedding light on the aesthetic-ideological requirements and pressures that have shaped the construction of African literature. What is immediately striking in the lives of all four centenarians is that none of them was published by the mission press. This is in marked contrast with most of their contemporaries, including Plaatje, Mqhayi, H.I.E. and R.R.R. Dhlomo, Victoria Swartbooi, Zora Futshane, Henry Masila Ndawo, A. C. Jordan and Thomas Mofolo, all of whom were published by either Lovedale or the Morija Sesuto Book Depot.⁶ Mphahlele's first book of short stories *Man Must Live* was published in 1946 by the short-lived, left-leaning independent publisher, the African Bookman based in Cape Town; Peter Abrahams' volume *A Blackman Speaks of Freedom* was published in 1942 by Durban-based Universal Printing Works. These publications, along with H.I.E. Dhlomo's *Valley of 1000 Hills*, published by Knox Publishers in Durban, point to the importance of proximate publishing modes and more workaday (and less morally censorious and politically conservative) publishing outlets for the publishing of African literature in South Africa during this period and the forms of writing these made possible.

Also evident is an important shift from about the mid-1940s from South African publishing houses to those based in London or New York, a change which was facilitated by international travel and exile.⁷ Abrahams' *Dark Testament* was published by the London-based publisher Allen and Unwin in 1942; his *Song of the City* (1945) and *Mine Boy* (1946) were both published by Dorothy Crisp, also based on London, while several novels by both Abrahams and Mphahlele were published by the London-based Faber and Faber (publisher of T.S. Eliot and Sylvia Plath, among others). Not least of the insights of

5 Thanks to Priyam Goswami Chowdury for stimulating discussions about a similar phenomenon in 1960s Calcutta. See also Goswami Chowdury (2023).

6 *Chaka* was published by the Morija Book Depot and the remaining authors were published by Lovedale Press. Marianhill Mission Press and the Ohlanga Institute were also significant publishing centres in this period.

7 Plaatje's *The Mote and the Beam: An Epic on Sex-Relationship 'Twixt White and Black in British South Africa* published by Youngs in New York in 1921 was a significant forerunner of this trend.

this cursory publishing history is the disproportionate role played by Faber and Faber in the 1940s and 50s, a role which was destined to be eclipsed with the emergence of Mbari Publishers in Nigeria and the Heinemann African Writers' Series in London. This is a dimension of African publishing which has yet to be explored.⁸ In Jabavu's case, as Steiner shows in her chapter, the turn to metropolitan publishing (in this instance, John Murray) freed her from the systems of institutionalised racism in South Africa and seemed to create conditions for the positive reception of her books. What is also striking is that this early international success did nothing to ensure either her visibility in South Africa or her longevity abroad. In Abrahams' case, as several readers' reports and letters of rejection from the publishers Allen and Unwin attest, the shift to the potentially less restrictive metropolitan scene carried its own set of problems. As Anthea Thorpe (2018) has argued, Abrahams' attempts to find a publisher in London involved having to navigate not only the particular kinds of metropolitan condescension reserved for African writers but also the pervasive "exoticism" that drove African literary publishing in this period" (2018, p. 66). Added to this, was the privileging of Black testimony and "slice of native life" narratives over other forms of literary engagement (Thorpe, 2018, p. 66), a literary consensus which would have had an inhibiting effect on more experimental kinds of writing.⁹

Finally, what of those who, like Nyembezi, continued to publish in South Africa, mostly in African languages? What can be uncovered about the paratextual and publishing histories of these texts; of writers' negotiations with the available publishing outlets and the dynamics of the school textbook publishing market? If this volume suggests a new interest in earlier moments in the history of African publishing, it also prompts attention to the particular role played by apartheid publishing venues such as Shuter and Shooter, the Pietermaritzburg-based publisher of many of Nyembezi's novels as well as the isiZulu novels of H.I.E Dhlomo. A close reading of the material contexts of African literary publishing, one which includes the missing history of African-language publishing, promises to shed even more light on the heterogeneous genealogies of African literature, the ways it has been shaped and the various forms of agency that African writers exercised.

In conclusion

As these and other discussions attest, *Foundational African Writers* is testimony to the manifold routes and possibilities opened up by Bhekizizwe Peterson's creative and intellectual work and the potential this holds for redrawing the theoretical terrain. Its

8 Abrahams, *Path of Thunder* appeared with Faber and Faber in 1948 while both *Song of the City* and *Mine Boy* were re-published by Faber and Faber in 1954. Other Faber and Faber productions include Abrahams' *Return to Goli* (1953), *Tell Freedom* (1954), *A Wreath for Udumo* (1956), Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard* (1951) and Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* (1960).

9 Both *Song of the City* and *Mine Boy* were rejected by Allen and Unwin (Thorpe 2018: 68). Two other manuscripts, also engaging with themes that troubled that prevailing view of 'African Literature' as defined in the West, were also rejected and remain unpublished, thus underscoring the decisive role played by metropolitan literary institutions in determining the style and content of African literary expression (University of Reading Special Collections, AUC183/2). Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* suffered a similar fate at the hands of Allen and Unwin but was later accepted by OUP (University of Reading Special Collections, HEB 27/10).

impetus for a decolonial, critical Humanities is evident in the seriousness with which it takes the minor, the oddment, the ill-fitting and the trace as well as in its provocation to understand past, present and future subjectivities through the long eye of history. Its attentiveness to place and context and its inter-disciplinary, experimental methodology are grounded in a critical disposition of curiosity and openness, one which prizes multi-valency and provisionality over the singular pursuit of definitive truth.

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