BLACK LITERATURE AND PERFORMANCE: SOME NOTES ON CLASS AND POPULISM

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Three major organisational initiatives have marked the last decade and a half of black political and economic life within South Africa. These are the growth of black working-class organisations from the early 1970's; the rise of Black Consciousness organisations and ideology from the late 1960's; and the resurgence of organisations of a non-racial, "progressive" orientation over the last four or five years. While these initiatives cannot ultimately be separated - they have engaged with, built on and changed, and generally interacted with each other - there are areas of cultural activity where their various ideologies and goals can be recognised.

I Black Consciousness.....

This period of organisational growth has also been marked by a burgeoning of black literature and cultural initiative generally. This cultural reawakening can largely be ascribed to the growth of the Black Consciousness movement, and the spread of its ideology in the townships, in the seventies. This movement, emerging among the radical intelligentsia of the black universities and theological colleges after a decade of political quiet, had a strong ideological and cultural component: black cultural revival, self-awareness and self-reliance, and the need for physical and psychological liberation from derogatory white images of black people. With regard to literature, the notion of the privatized, skilled writer or artist was attacked. Art and literature were seen as ways of raising social awareness and showing the need for a changed society, and black self-expression and control in the arts became a major preoccupation. Groups of students and intellectuals

promoted black theatre, poetry and music, often apocalyptic in tone, through a variety of cultural and student groups (Mihloti Black Theatre, Mdali, PET and TECON to name just a few early groups).

Despite the attempts made to forge community links (the formation of the Black Community Project in 1973 is perhaps the earliest of these) and set up worker organisations (such as the constitution of Black Allied Workers Union in 1972), Black Consciousness seems to have begun as, and up to now largely remained, an ideology particularly attractive to the radical black petty bourgeosie. This more privileged and relatively better educated class has historically been more susceptible to the pull of European culture: because of its distance from the means of production, it has also tended to rely heavily on ideology for its self-identification. This class also tends to oscillate in its support between bourgeosie and the working-class; and in South Africa the racial barriers to the social progress and economic betterment of the black section of this class has often led it to align "downwards" and seek the political support of the black lower classes, emphasizing a racial commonality.

A great deal of Black Consciousness art and literature bear out the above generalisations. There is a restated emphasis on the need for blacks to rediscover their cultural heritage and "roots" - a preoccupation which is more attractive to that class which has been the most culturally alienated. Much of the poetry and plays which have emerged gesture back to a highly idealized pre-colonial rural past, and stress the need to rediscover "traditional values". For instance, the poems of Ingoapele Madingoane, one of the most popular poets in Soweto after 1976, contain many images of an African past destroyed by the deprivations of man, capitalism and apartheid (often not distinguished from each other). This idealized, communal black past is then projected forward to imply a communal

black experience in modern South African society. Generally, it is finally concluded that all blacks in the country are equally oppressed, no matter what their class position. (1)

The desire of a more privileged and better educated stratum to align itself "downwards" can be seen in the insistence in the literature on performance and direct communication with an audience. Literature must be used to forge links with and mobilize the masses. As theatre, musical performance and performance-poetry were the literacy forms most amenable to this goal, they are the forms most common in Black Consciousness cultural expression until at least 1978. Performances took place in group contexts which reinforced the feeling of participation by the audience and unity between them and the performers: an improvised literature of public statement, ritualistic and didactic in effect, was the prevalent result of such situations. (2) Plays usually had a minimal text, and few plays were published. Despite the fact that a few of the better known individual poets published, publication of literature was minimal outside of Black Consciousness publications such as the Saso Newsletter until the advent of Staffrider magazine in the late 1970s. Publishing itself was frowned on by some younger writers as politically suspect. (3)

Black performers and writers still see themselves as the spokesmen, or conscience, of all black people. This goes hand in hand with an often passionate identification with "the people", and a belief that all art must be political in orientation and purpose. Writers show an impatience with any art that was not immediately relevant to political liberation. (4) The theatre of Gibson Kente and Sam Mhangwane, popular in the townships in the early seventies, was attacked for being commercial, escapist and not showing the oppressive nature of township life truthfully. Extravaganza like Ipi-Tombi were (and are still) attacked, as well as any

theatre which showed blacks as passive bearers of suffering, such as that of Athol Fugard. (5) An attempt must be made to reach, mobilize and learn from ordinary black people:

> The black poet does not write from an ivory tower for an elitist minority. He regards himself as a poet of the people, from the people, and uses words understandable by all.
>
> We have to go to the people..It is the man in the street - how he understands BC - that I feel we must listen to. (6)

After the Soweto revolt of 1976, the banning of at least two organisations which directly effected black literature (Medupe and the UBJ) in 1977, and the exile of many prominent black literary figures, a greater emphasis on actually publishing work was discernible. In this process Ravan Press and, particularly, Staffrider were central. While fictional and imaginative genres from black writers and literary groups (such as CYA, Madi, Bayajula, the Allahpoets and others) predominate, the pages of this magazine also show a desire to articulate the experiences and voice of lower class people in the townships - shown in its interviews with people who do not have the literary skills to place their own experiences on paper and in the photographs and visual images focusing on the predicaments of commuters, hostel-dwellers, squatters and others. (7)

The emphasis on black communal experience, nationhood and solidarity has however often resulted in class divisions within black society being conjured away. Rather than working from a premise that class and ideological struggle permeates South African society, and that all man-made institutions are an outcome of political and economic struggles for power, "oppression" is opposed to a "natural order", and the purpose of the artist comes to be to expose a transcendental "truth". In Madingoane's

classless, naturalized universe "Freedom is the law of nature" and "Justice is rooted in the universal order of things". The artists' struggle, according to one young playwright, is "a struggle to recreate a distorted reality...A good...dramatist is the one who is not anti-man but anti-evil". (8) In some cases, middle class blacks are regarded as "non-whites" (as in some of Mafika Gwala's poems) or all blacks are put forward as being working-class (as in Mutloastse's story "Hell in Azania"). Class therefore becomes an attitude of mind, and class divisions are seen as a fall from original "blackness". Capitalism and consumerism are often explained away as a simple degenerative force which should be resisted with black authenticity (black women should not wear makeup, for example). Even someone like Mtutuzeli who puts forward an economic explanation for the way South African society has been structured, falls as easily into uncritically humanist stances in his stories. In a few other cases there is a careful sketching of the divisions, foibles, strengths and weaknesses of the people who make up a township or community, as in Ahmed Essop's "Fordsburg", Njabulo Ndebele's "Fools" and Mongane Serote's "To Every Birth Its Blood", but in the lastnamed case at least the aim is to proselytize the need to unite as a community against political and social oppression.

Black consciousness literature has consistently stressed an anti-elitist stance and the need for relevance and direct communication in literature and performance, and can therefore not be dismissed simply as petty bourgeois literature. Nevertheless, the literature so far shows very clearly the limitations and contradictions in the world view of the writer/performers concerned. The fiction of an egalitarian pre-colonial era transmutes easily into the rhetoric of a classless modern South Africa, in which equality and liberty would be guaranteed if it were not for apartheid. The stress is on human nature rather than class

struggle as the major force of social change, and a distinctive African personality which lends itself to collective existence is constructed.

Furthermore a great deal of literature focuses on the way individuals, often of a more privileged background, suffer oppression: and this is generalised as the experience of all blacks, of whom the writer/performer is one:

> It is immaterial whether the poet writes in the first person or the third person. The pronoun "we" sustains a communal bond, it is at the same time the voice of the poet as well as the voice of the people. Even when the poet uses the first person, it is not the assertion of the individual regarding to his individuality but he articulates the collective experience and communal spirit through the "I". (9)

A great deal of the literature is also in English, despite the efforts of some literacy groups (such as Mpumalanga Arts in Natal and Guyo Book Club in Venda) and some individual writers to write in African languages or use township slang. At best there tends to be mainly English texts with a minimum of Zulu/Sotho to give "authenticity" to the speech. This linguistic choice, of course, precludes an audience of lower class semi- or non-literate people, even if oral performance is used as a way of overcoming this problem. The literature of Black Consciousness does contain a greater diversity of technique and subject matter than many critics allow. It has been especially important in taking up political themes such as the degradation and poverty of the segregated townships, the plethora of apartheid laws which govern the lives of all blacks, deaths in detention, police brutality, bureaucratic corruption and so on. Yet there are many absences in its subject matter as well. Most of the literature shows very little focusing on the day-to-day experiences of lower class black people

within, or outside, the urban conglomerations where most of the writers live. Sustained interest in areas of working-class life does not seem to be high either, outside of a few individuals such as the playwrights Maishe Maponya and Matsemela Manaka (whom I will discuss later) and the prose writer Matshoba, whose stories describe such subjects as prison labour on farms and the difficulties of hostel dwellers or people in Transkei, albeit from the viewpoint of an outsider.

The issue of relevance to township life most frequently discussed is education, especially in the context of the 1976 and 1980 revolts. This is possibly not accidental: education, although of importance to all black people, is of particular importance to a relatively privileged class which see it as their only passport to "betterment" in a racially repressive society. The other township issue which one can find with some persistence is transport, especially the use of train journeys as a subject matter. Here, interestingly enough, this situation of travelling has frequently been used as a metaphor for the rootlessness of black people, who have not had access to property rights. Only in one or two cases do the intolerable conditions within the trains serve as the focus of the story. A few poems refer to hospitals - but again hospital conditions are used as a metaphor for subjects as diverse as praise of the fortitude of black nurses, the lack of sympathy of blacks towards each other and the need for unity. Other township issues such as rents and housing do not get much attention.

Given the volume of work which has appeared in the last decade, the absence of such subject matter (dealt with either realistically or symbolically) is surprising. Where working-class life is described, the feeling a reader gets is one of distance from these people on the part of the writer, who often describes working-class experience in rather abstract terms: shebeen queens on the train, mine

dancers, nightwatchmen, migrants, washerwomen are seldom given a life or reality of their own in the stories, but are used to stress racial identification, the need for unity or to make the obvious point that these people are subject to extreme forms of control and oppression. But attitudes to lower class people do vary, Mbulelo Mzamane's exposition of the resourcefulness of a rural cousin entering city life in his short story collection "Mzala" is a far cry from the mocking commentary on people with "ubugoduka" in some of Sepamla's poems.

Not only are township issues glossed over. Not many stories, poems and plays deal with the workplace either. Few exceptions to this generalisation occur: one would be Miriam Tlali's "Muriel at Metropolitan", which deals with the difficulties and racial prejudice experienced by an office worker. Another would be Gcina Mhlope's story of her brief career as a domestic servant. The pages of Staffrider have recently carried a few stories by new writers such as Bheki Maseko and Joel Matlou, who both describe workplace experiences as members of the working-class.

The form in which most work either written by or specifically aimed at issues which affect the black working-class appears is theatre. Of performance-orientated literature, theatre is possibly the medium most conducive to presenting situations, episodes and sequences which together most immediately constitute an approach to lived experience. Some black playwrights - such as Manaka and Zakes Mda - have made a point of presenting their plays at squatter camps, weddings and on other such occasions and concentrate on the lives of beggars, miners and so on. The multi-racial Junction Avenue Theatre Company's plays like "Security" and "Dikhitsheneng" deal with domestic labour and an unemployed man who gets a job as a watchdog, and their work has been disseminated to both theatre - and lower class audiences (such as

domestic servants). However, the play which stands out as most atypical is "Imfuduso", in that it was generated from within a working-class environment, and was conceived and created by the women of Crossroads squatter camp to communicate their misery and daily harassment to a larger audience.

A growing awareness of the importance of popular literature and performance to demonstrate and deal with areas which affect the less privileged is apparent in the recent plays of Manaka and Maishe Maponya. They have both voiced a preference for non-commercial, critical theatre. Two of their plays, Manaka's "Egoli - City of Gold" and Maponya's "The Hungry Earth", centre upon the lives of migrants and mineworkers and the breakup of family life: Manaka's "Imbumba" gives a view of farm labour, while his "Pula" deals with resettlement. Maponya's "The Nurse" attacks conditions in a township hospital. Manaka's gloss on "Egoli", however, shows that this is still an initiative to deal with these issues from the outside: his purpose is moreover still one of pan-class unification:

> Through our eyes we have seen the sufferings of the people. We have seen them being moved from fertile lands to barren areas, we have seen them starve in squatter camps. Through our eyes we have seen the life of our people assume various shapes of humiliation and suffering. Thus the continual struggle to create "Egoli"...we felt committed to focus our creative thoughts on the plight of the workers. (10)

> We have the literate and the illiterate, that is basically the black middle class and the workers. So it becomes the struggle of the dramatist to accommodate all the dispossessed people. (11)

There is still a strong Black Consciousness component in the work of both dramatists. "The

Nurse" contains the message that nurses must unite and unionise in terms of a struggle defined as blacks (nurses) against whites (doctors). "Egoli" contains strong use of Black Consciousness imagery (reference to ancestors, symbolic chains, traditional rural life around a fire etc.) and only occassionally uses or refers to workplace actualities (it can be argued, too, that the scenes of drilling and lashing are used partly because of their theatrical possibilities as gesture). The final message is that blacks must unite and, in particular, workers must politicise themselves as presumably the middle classes have already done.

II Non-racialism.....

Some black students, intellectuals and workers have however now moved away from a viewpoint which sees racial domination as the cornerstone of oppression in South Africa to one which places more explanatory weight on economic exploitation and a class analysis. While a few of these people have stayed within Black Consciousness organisations, others have switched allegiance to the non-racial, "popular democratic" organisations which have re-emerged in the past few years. In literature the most noteworthy example of this trend is perhaps Medu, a group formed by South African artists in exile in Botswana.

However, despite the ideological differences of opinion, the differences among black writers are at the moment more tendencies than absolute divisions. Many of the non-racial writers borrow from Black Consciousness thought (and have usually passed through a Black Consciousness phase), while writers who tend towards a cultural nationalism play at least passing regard to class issues (even if this remains a collapsing of all blacks into workers).

The writers who stress "anti-racism, national democracy and self-determination" (and, it must be said,

some writers in the left of Black Consciousness organisations also) advocate working-class leadership of the popular-democratic struggle in South Africa, and a changed economic system in any post-apartheid society. These writers and performers insist on the democratisation of culture as well: culture and art must reflect the hopes and aspirations of the majority of South Africans, and must further the struggle for a democratic society. Cultural equipment must be made more freely available and literacy must be extended to all. The priority of artists and writers, it is said, must be political art and the creation of a new culture which will destroy exploitation. (12)

Other frequently made points by this group are a dislike for commercial culture and the use of negritude in advertising, and an even greater emphasis on the need for artists to identify with "the people", using Fanon's adage that the artist must not only write political songs, but make these songs with the people. In line with this maxim, Medu for one has involved itself in community theatre in Botswana. Non-racialism and the structure of capitalist exploitation in South Africa are highlighted, at the same time as a unity (variously conceived of as among blacks and among all who dislike apartheid) is stressed, as in Serote's story of urban-rural solidarity "The Mosquito". A great deal of importance is placed on the history of organisational resistance in South Africa, rather than a more amorphous history of black nationhood: culture of resistance as handmaiden to this history is emphasised. There is also criticism levelled at idealistic notions of "traditional culture": Lefifi Tladi, at one point a member of this group, came under strong attack for sculpting African images of a "curio" type. (13) Instead, it is stressed that the values of previous African cultures will have to be sifted through and what is thought valuable selected and used. (14) Generally, it is said that writers and artists must use existing forms but

inject them with progressive content.

It is nevertheless not entirely clear how far commentators who accept a class analysis have taken the debate on the role and function of the writer/perfomer and literature forward from previous Black Consciousness assertions at this point in time. (Neither is a qualitative difference in the subject matter of their stories, poems and plays from previous Black Consciousness literature noticeable as yet, although it is perhaps too early to state this categorically.) Many of the arguments used are similar to what has gone before: the need for a culture of resistance to be built up inside the country (sometimes called "the national culture"), the need for unity and for artists to be active politically, as well as a necessary connection between art and politics. The phrases "the people" or "the struggling masses" are substituted for "blacks" or "black people", but the level of generality remains in many cases much the same. Politically orientated writers and performers of a more privileged class become unproblematically joined to "the people" again, this time in the guise of "cultural workers".

Obviously, the stress on popular support and unified action is seen as important by the "class" faction too, as is the need to create a consensus that the present State is inimical to the creation of a democratic society and any free, uncensored expression. Although there are important differences in ideology and programme, there are further similarities which can be noticed between Black Consciousness and "class-oriented" organisations and literature. In my opinion both the Black Consciousness and "non-racial" organisational initiatives are populist (or popular-democratic) in orientation and programme. That is, they both seek to mobilise and appeal to "the people" for support in a conflict with the power bloc. In the Black Consciousness programme, "the

people" are defined as blacks, "coloureds" and indians; while in the non-racial organisations "the people" include all those who oppose apartheid and the present political dispensation. In Black Consciousness, a supposed cultural unity of black nationhood is used by political groups, usually petty bourgeois, to mobilise a wide spectrum of black people to identify with and support their political programmes. The "progressive", non-racial organisations stress the need to build up a "culture of the oppressed" to use against the "culture of the oppressor". (15) In both cases, national identification is seen as culturally important, although the non-racial commentators more acutely see the need to give this nationalism a progressive, anti-racial content. In both cases, cultural and national identities belonging to "the people" are transformed into symbols for use in political conflict: in many cases these symbols can overlap (the assegai and the shield, the strong black matriach). In both cases too, writers and performers seek to identify and become one with a "popular consciousness".

The point must be made that "the people" are not entirely coterminous with the working-class. Popular struggle seeks to include individuals from different classes in a common basic programme. Therefore, popular-democratic organisations who advocate working-class leadership need to be aware precisely how they intend to put these goals into effect organisationally. Similarly, cultural activists of a petty bourgeois background who wish to extend communication and express a popular culture need to show how the cultural expression of working-class people is going to become an integral part of the popular culture/black culture they advocate. Without this clarity, there is a possibility that their populist conceptions will actually obscure some dimensions of social experience and struggle.

III Worker Plays.....

In the light of this, the worker plays which have begun appearing over the last three or four years are noteworthy. One of the results of the growth of worker militancy in the early 1970's and subsequent growth of organised unions during the decade has been that political organisations have increasingly asserted the central role of the working-class in achieving political and social change in South Africa. However, little cultural expression from the working-class has been forthcoming from these organisations' cultural wings, as the "popular" culture aimed at has remained by and large the province of more privileged individuals and groups. It can, therefore, be argued that plays such as "Ilanga Le So Phonela Abasebenzi", the "Dunlop play" and "Ziyagika/Turning Point" (the first two involving participants from MAWU and the last from a CUSA union), mark a distint break with what has gone before.

Historically, the removals of blacks from inner city areas to segregated townships over the last fifty years, the creation of a male compound/hostel environment to house a great number of migrant workers, and the fact that a large proportion of the black working-class are still employed as contract and migrant labour have worked against the building up of a homogeneous working class culture, even within different regions. On the other hand, a common experience of workplace conditions and subservience to wage labour has served as a unifying factor amongst the working class. Working class cultural activity over the last hundred years has tended to play its major role in assisting their adaptation and survival in the urban environment - homeboy clubs, shebeens, self-help societies etc. - and has generally been of a more oral or ephemeral nature - sport, songs, music and dancing especially. The handful of migrant foundry workers who constructed "Ilanga", for instance, had little prior

experience of "theatre" or "literature" in the accepted sense of the word. Indeed, "Ilanga" arose initially out of the re-enactment by striking workers of their arrest and subsequent assault, to assist their lawyer when he was trying to take comprehensive statements on what exactly had happened. (16) What experience there has been of theatre by participants in these plays seems to have been almost entirely the less intellectual, less political theatre of Gibson Kente and others like him.

The black working class in South Africa has had less resources and leisure time to indulge in self-conscious cultural creation of the more "literacy" sort. On the other hand, many black petty bourgeois artists in this country are employed in jobs that either help, or leave an opportunity for, their artistic activity: journalism, advertising, publishing, administrative work, and so on.

The growth of organised unions, may, perhaps, open up the way and provide the resources for new areas of cultural activity to be explored by people previously denied access to culture. At the same time the few worker plays that have been performed so far have linked cultural expression in a unique way to the workplace. (17) For the worker-turned-actors in "Ilanga":

> Performing in the play was more than manifesting acting skills, it was a question of bringing their daily-life experience to the stage. They are faced with what it means to be a black migrant worker. (18)

These plays are noteworthy in that they all, to a large extent, reflect and comment on life on the factory floor. In distinction to most of the literature I have discussed above, the centrality of production and the work process as the principal site of exploitation in South Africa is acknowledged. (19) It is at the point of production, too, where class identities and

divisions are most apparent. The issues taken up in these plays are all issues crucial to the experiences and struggles of the black working class. Strikes, scabbing, accidents in the workplace, health hazards, hostel conditions, boss-worker relationships, the situation of foremen, overtime, the desirability of factory as against other types of work (such as domestic service), liaison committees, the need for unions, and the difficulties workers have in understanding the bosses' English or Afrikaans are all items which have emerged in these plays.

This insistence on the importance of working class issues and experience is not the same as the minimal use made of such subject matter in most previous black literature and performance, where work is often used as a metaphor for racial oppression and where all blacks are so easily seen as being workers. (20)

There is a strong didactic and mimetic quality apparent in these plays as well. When played before worker audiences, strong attempts are made to include the audience in the play - through the singing of union songs, and actors talking to and sitting among the audience. The emphasis is on putting forward situations which the audience can identify with, and also in interpreting the structures of oppression and exploitation in these situations for the audience. As one "Ilanga" actor said:

> We wanted to show our brothers who went back to work - and those who scabbed - the bad relationship between the boss and workers. Also some people don't know anything about the unions and we felt it was a good idea to explain it to them in this way. We wanted to show people that the foremen are on the side of the employers...(21)

The emphasis in these plays is on performance rather than a text, and the plays have been performed both

in front of workers (in venues such as union offices, hostels, schools and churches) and in other contexts (such as to university audiences). The desire to involve the audience, and the strong importance attached to the need for unity, show similarities to much Black Consciousness theatre. However, a different approach to this common subject is apparent. Matsemela Manaka's "Imbumba", for example, plays out the unity theme from a rather different perspective than a play like "Ziyagika". In "Imbumba", a "boss-boy" terrorises convict labourers on a farm until they unite and humiliate him, at which the demoralised boss-boy "swallowed his pride and confessed to them that he was no more baasboy but Zwelakhe. As he was fired...he led them in their escape to freedom." (22) I would argue that this stress on "renaming" and plea for more privileged blacks to unite with their lower class brethren (and then take on a leadership role in the fight for freedom) is a petty bourgeois conception of the course liberation should take. "Ziyagika", on the other hand, deals with a similar situation (an impimpi who wants to advance in his job, who then joins forces with other workers in a strike); but the whole play ends with a plea for trade union unity and working-class collective action as a means of struggle, rather than assigning to one individual a leadership position. As another example, "Ilanga" contains strong criticisms of a black SEIFSA representative who talks to the striking workers of their common brotherhood.

As a general observation, the use of an admixture of languages (English-Afrikaans vernacular) in a play like "Ziyagika" also foregrounds English less than, for example "Egoli". The use of African languages in plays aimed at communicating to worker audiences who have less command of English shows a less extreme divorce between performer and audience than the more self-conscious decision by the African Writers' Association to use these languages to "get back to the people". (23)

However, it would be mistaken to perceive these plays as unproblematically and spontaneously expressing a working class culture. While the traditional and communal bases of culture remain stronger among the working class (especially migrant and contract workers) than among a relatively privileged black elite, translating the direct experience of work and means of working class expression into "theatre" does contradict and alter some of the expectations and preconceptions of audience and actors. (24) Moreover, often cultural agents who are not working class seem to play an important role in transforming the workers' experiences into more aesthetically grounded theatre the role of the lawyer in "Ilanga" is an example, as is the role of members of the Junction Avenue Theatre Company in workshopping both "Ilanga" and the "Dunlop play". These plays have also on occasion been taken out of the context of worker audiences and been performed at venues where they have striven to become theatrical performances in their own right: and some of the performers have shown a desire to become actors in a more conventional sense. This separation of working class performers (and writers) from an organic relationship with the culture which bred them is not necessarily unusual: there are few possibilities in South Africa and elsewhere of workers gaining access to the dominant culture's world of "drama" and "literature" which are not mediated by some form of patronage or outside technical assistance. (25) Theatre taken out of its context breaks the spontaneous relationship with its intended audience: and the necessity writers and performers face to have their work published or performed in more commercially viable forms in order to survive is an ongoing problem for all artists, not just working class ones (for instance, the recognised black playwrights who have most consistently stressed the need to communicate with "the people", Manaka and

Maponya, have built up their reputations considerably more with overseas tours).

The historical way in which capitalism came to South Africa has helped maintain a feeling of racial identity among black people: racist laws, the maintenance of a semblance of pre-colonial society in the Bantustans and segregation in the towns, facilitated the continuity of a racial and ethnic awareness among blacks even as they were urbanised and proletarianised. Furthermore, many townships do not have a discernible "geography of class", where neighbourhoods would tend to be mostly working class or middle class. Soweto, for example, contains people of various classes placed often in close proximity to each other (though some areas do seem to have some sort of "geography of class": parts of Dube are populated by the more wealthy, for instance), and experiences and attitudes belonging to different classes emerge to some extent in any subsequent communal cultural expression. In other townships, such as Mdantsane in the Cape and some townships in the Vaal Triangle and East Rand, it can be argued that the population is in the main working class, although other political and social divisions remain (between tenants and landlords; between hostel dwellers and those with permanent residency etc.). Life in the townships, in the rural areas and in the workplace can give a variety of possible identifications - class, racial, ethnic, sexual, regional - which may be used by people in different circumstances. Furthermore when people go home at the end of the day or at the end of a contract, they do not enter a completely separate sphere of existence: workplace and domicile experiences and identities exist in a relationship of interconnectedness and influence.

There is no pure "class consciousness" or pure "racial consciousness" among blacks (or any other group) in South Africa today. Black workers are aware of being oppressed as workers and as blacks;

while other classes, like the petty bourgeoisie, share a similar experience of racial oppression even though their class position modifies (and in the case of the petty bourgeois, alleviates) part of that experience. Therefore cultural identities of a racial or ethnic nature will constitute some of the basis for all black literature and performance. Moreover, references to "the people" or to "black people" within literature and performance has a very real experiential presence among some audiences, especially in a situation like South Africa where blacks of different classes are denied political rights because of their skin colour or where political support or condemnation of the present government is such an ever-present factor in everyday life. Nevertheless, the use made of these cultural identities will differ depending on how individuals and groups of writers and performers take them up and give them class expression.

Working class literature and performance is usually defined in relation to four factors: author(s), content, audience and "proletarian world view". The worker plays which have emerged recently can be defined as working class in the light of most of these factors, although they do contain some of the contradictions and inconsistencies which seem to surround all self-conscious cultural expression. These plays are a crucial complement to previous black literature and performance in that they have allowed a space for working class expression which has previously hardly existed in our literature and theatre. Whether these plays, based mainly on workplace issues and experience, are the forerunners of a wider use of literature by members of the black working class is conjectural at this point: but it must be pointed out that, in England at any rate, a great volume of what is called "working class literature" goes beyond the factory floor to cover problems around family life (abortion, father/son conflict etc.), unemployment and homelessness and other facets of working class experiences. (26)

The aim of what has been said above is not, however, to mechanistically deflate art and literature to simple class categories or abstract political messages. The realm of art contains powerful use of images and words which cannot be defined away so simply. Neither is it possible to dismiss Black Consciousness or other populist art as irrevelant: as the attack on elitist conceptions of culture and a dominant white liberal expression which Black Consciousness represents has cleared the way for further cultural initiatives among black people. Furthermore literature and performance which speaks to "the people" can, on occasion, deal with working class issues in a sympathetic and artistically cogent way. Nevertheless, in South Africa up to this time the dominant populist discourse among oppositional political groups hides the paucity of black literary expression with knowledge of, or by, black workers: a paucity easily forgotten in the prevalent rhetoric about "popular" or "mass-based" literature.

The lesson these plays serve to derive is that any attempt to conceive or analyse an oppositional "national culture" in South Africa (at the moment on the agenda of some writers and artists) will have to take notice of several facts. One, that for such a culture to be truly representative it will have to include working class expression as a major constituent. Two, that the conception of English as a lingua franca which usually accompanies the "national culture" idea does not address the problem that many people in this country neither speak English fluently nor are fully literate. Three, that rather than pointing the way to a few artists and writers speaking on behalf of "the people", it is perhaps more important that working class culture be given the place to develop as a major constituent of our cultural life on its own terms. For:

> A politics that addresses itself to people's felt difficulties, hopes and aspirations, actually needs to know what these are rather than assume them from some pre-conceived programme; working-class writing, in all its forms, provides an invaluable range of understanding of the dominant forms of oppression and division, and is therefore an integral and central part of an active and participatory working-class politics. (27)

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