

“Inside the cavity of shame”: a critical presentation of the New Prison Poetry Project (1998), and the spaces of expression and alterity constructed in the writing of the participants.

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this entire thesis is my own original work, unless otherwise stated, and that it has not been submitted to any other university for a similar or any other degree.

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ABSTRACT

Chapter One will introduce the central area of exploration of this study and establish the main terms of reference and guidelines of the research.

Chapter Two will deal with the background and history of the project, and will include a discussion on creative writing as therapy in the context of a prison.

Chapter Three will present a critical overview of the project's aims and results, as well as an account of the pedagogical methods employed. It will also analyse the work of three members of the writing group: Vusi Mthembu, Themba Vilakazi and Sibusiso Majola.

Chapter Four will outline the socio-political context of my primary research material: a collection of poems written in prison by Bheki Mkhize, Sipho Mkhize and Bhek'themba Mbhele. It will also include a brief biographical account of the three writers, as well as an historical examination of the Seven Days War in Pietermaritzburg in the early nineties.

Chapter Five will focus on the three writers' accounts of incarceration, the threat of violence in prison and their resistance through writing to the loss of identity.

Chapter Six will deal with the issue of alterity, and the way that the writers represent issues of identity in their poetry, and create spaces of difference and distinction. It will also focus on intertextuality, and analyse the manner in which the writers negotiate the Western tradition of aesthetics in order to stake claim to their own spaces of difference in the prison.

Chapter Seven will conclude the study, and will examine contemporary cultural studies theory with specific reference to South Africa. It will also include an overview of the proposition of the research, and elaborate the way forward for a popular culture embracing such findings.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: “Inside the cavity of shame”

In South Africa, the ordeal of detention and imprisonment over the past fifty years has informed in a significant manner cultural – and, in this case, specifically literary – production. The category of prison literature, as a distinct, prevailing genre, has developed a special identity that in large part has evolved out of this country’s fraught history of racial segregation, the popular resistance to this oppression and the brutal response by the Apartheid State.

Much work has been done on prison writing in South Africa during the twentieth century, focussing particularly on the period from the first State of Emergency in the 1960s onwards. (Certainly, the nineteenth century and even earlier experiences of detention locally would be a fruitful area of further research.) In this current study, though, I propose to introduce a pioneering body of contemporary and original texts (written in the mid-to-late-90s), and to inaugurate the study of this material as part of the general tradition of the prison memoir.

The encounter with detention and imprisonment is a powerfully recurring trope in much twentieth century South African writing, from Paton and Nakasa to Ndebele and Brink. But it is the autobiographical testimony of the prison memoir that has consistently determined the experience and expression of incarceration as a literary product. Herman Charles Bosman’s depiction of life on death row in *Cold Stone Jug* (1949) set up the confessional mode of witness in South African prison literature that was followed in a more avowedly political fashion in the mid-60s by Ruth First’s *117 Days*, Albie Sachs’ self-titled jail diary (1966) and Hugh Lewin’s *Bandiet* in 1974.

In an enormously potent and evocative manner, prison writing in this country straddles the divide between the broad terms of personal and political, between literature as solipsistic self-expression and literature as so-called 'weapon in the struggle'. Witness the number of autobiographical works by political activists and trade unionists written as testimony of their incarceration: Molefe Pheto's *And Night Fell: Memoirs of a Political Prisoner in South Africa* (1983), Michael Dingake's *My Fight against Apartheid* (1987) and Caesarina Makhoere's *No Child's Play* (1988). Witness too the testimonies by novelists and poets which acted as protest, as defiance and solidarity with the forces of political resistance: James Matthews' *Pass me a Meatball, Mr Jones* (1977)¹, Jeremy Cronin's *Inside* (1983), Breyten Breytenbach's *True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1984) and Dikobe wa Mogale's *prison poems* (1992).

My present research, however, has a very narrow historical, even geographical territory. Although the rich tradition of South African prison writing is inevitably the cultural field within which I aim to contextualise my primary material, and although this tradition most certainly will be drawn upon to illustrate or support particular propositions in my study, it is not my major focus of attention. Instead, it is the literary material produced in 1998 by a small and largely unknown group of men during a creative writing project in the New Prison in Pietermaritzburg (together with other material produced independently), that is at the centre of this study, and that I wish to promote and even champion – if only so that somewhere their experiences, their suffering, are remembered and validated.

In keeping with the very specific historical focus of this research, I have also consciously

¹ Re-issued in 2001 as *Poems from a Prison Cell* (Cape Town).

eschewed the vast and incredibly rich body of first-hand accounts of incarceration and detention by leading writers and human rights activists from other parts of the world. The work of writers such as Dostoevsky, Wilde and Solzhenitsyn (to name but a few) and activists such as Jacobo Timerman and Anatoly Marchenko have regrettably, but very deliberately, been bracketed out from this research in order to maintain the attention on South Africa and the experience of imprisonment by its own writers and activists. A more comprehensive study might interestingly contextualise prison writings by South Africans within the larger, international framework, but that is not the purpose of this research.

In 1996, as education officer of the Tatham Art Gallery, I initiated a programme of art development workshops with medium term (ten to fifteen years) male inmates of the New Prison in Pietermaritzburg. The courses were run in collaboration with the education section of the Department of Correctional Services under Captain Thomas Dibakwane.

During this and subsequent courses I became aware of a great interest in creative writing (especially poetry) amongst the inmates. Many of the men had actually written their own work. While most of the men were isiZulu speakers (two spoke isiXhosa and one was a native seSotho speaker), a fair number nevertheless also wrote in English.

In 1999 I began conducting poetry writing workshops with a group of approximately ten B-class inmates from Section G in the prison. B-class prisoners are entitled to participate in educational/recreational activities as a result of 'good behaviour'. The workshops were conducted under the auspices of the *Fidelities* Poetry Project, a poetry development initiative started in 1995, which comprised readings, workshops and the publication of an annual literary magazine.

Material produced during, and also as a result of, the programme was published in several volumes of the Pietermaritzburg-based poetry collection, *Fidelities* (1997, 1998, 2000, 2001 and 2003). Three of the inmates were allowed out of prison on 23 May 1999 to read their work at a public forum at the Hexagon Theatre. The work of the same writers was also selected for publication in another South African literary magazine, *Botsotso* (issue 10: 1999).

At the time of writing this study five members of the writing group have been released. One was released in 2000, and has set up a cultural group in Dambuza township which uses drama, song, dance and poetry to promote Aids awareness and Anti-Crime messages. Another member of the group who was released in 2002 is still in Pietermaritzburg, but has been unable to find employment. A third, released in 2003, has moved to Estcourt, but is unemployed. The whereabouts of the two others who were released are as yet unknown.

There were six key participants in the project: Sipho Mkhize, Bheki Mkhize, Bhek'themba Mbhele, Vusi Mthembu, Themba Vilakazi and Sibusiso Majola. Sipho and Bhek'themba did not actually participate in the 1998 writing workshops, since they had both earlier been transferred to Sevente Prison. Written material by each of the men is in my possession, ranging from one poem in the case of Vusi Mthembu to an anthology written jointly by Bheki Mkhize, Sipho Mkhize and Bhek'themba Mbhele, and an autobiography written by Sipho.

My research will document the course of the workshops, and describe the pedagogical methodology employed. The primary source material (the poetry, prose and letters of the participants) will be critically examined in the light of post-apartheid cultural theorizing which seeks to highlight the following significant aspects:

- i. The articulation of a private discursive space in the writing which is enlarged upon and against the massively public, temporal process of incarceration (the idea of serving time).
- ii. The active construction of identity, comprising subjectivity and self-worth, through the restorative and transformative function of language, in particular the poetic imagining of alternatives to the fierce limits of the actual.
- iii. The elaboration of multi-vocal forms of expression in the context of a monolithic state institution which enforces the supremacy of a single voice only (its own).
- iv. The formulation of a new discourse of 'popular' culture by the writers in tandem with and sometimes in opposition to the disciplined and hierarchical literary canon.

By acknowledging with respect and seriousness the imaginative territory articulated in prison writing, this research seeks (in however humble or constrained a manner) to restore dignity and self-worth to a severely marginalised (and brutalised) sector of our society. It will also promote the idea (if only that) of the recovery and rehabilitation of offenders through the validation of their own selfhood, expressed in imaginative terms.

The research will encourage a more critical appreciation and understanding of forms of literary expression not aligned with the canon of (essentially) Western aesthetic production. It will focus attention on the creation of subjectivity and selfhood in the writers of this material through the practice of poetic expression. The research will also seek to extend the body of studies of contemporary South African popular culture, and enlarge the critical discourse necessary to understand and explain it.

It is important, though, at this juncture to pause for a moment and to consider the terms of

reference and the conventions that structure my critical reading of the primary material documented and researched here. To begin with, the quotation in the title of this study (“Inside the cavity of shame”) comes from a line in the poem, “The Cavity of Shame”, written by one of the inmates, Sibusiso Majola, during the creative writing intervention in the prison.

Secondly, as stated earlier, none of the participants in the project spoke English as their first language, although it was the language in which most of the teaching was conducted (with some exceptions, which will be discussed later), and in which the participants wrote during the workshops. Many of these men had been writing in prison long before my intervention, and (judging from the material shown to me) had used both English and isiZulu (mainly) in their compositions. Interestingly, this material seldom (if ever) employed both languages in the same poem, and only infrequently made use of township and conversational vocabulary. There was a very definite literary convention that the men saw poetry subscribing to – be that verse in English or in their native language. This will be examined in further detail later; suffice it to say here that poetry was regarded as a mode of utterance both participating in and different to their everyday reality, the reality of long-term imprisonment.

One of the participants in the project, Bheki Mkhize, had co-written a collection of poetry with his brother, Sipho, and a cousin, Bhék’themba Mbhele – neither of whom, as I explained earlier, were formally involved in the project. This collection, *We Waiting in the Dark*, written in 1993/94, was entirely in English, with the exception of three poems in isiZulu. Sipho Mkhize, however, had also written an autobiography in his home language, *Amasosha Ngaphandle Kwezi Kali* [sic] (*Soldiers without Weapons*), written intermittently between 1993 and 1996. Apart from providing background biographical information, this specific text does not form a substantial part of this

study. I have concentrated here only on those texts written predominantly in English – although, of course, the isiZulu material would be a fascinating area for further research, which undoubtedly would also shed light on their work in English.

The fact that Mkhize's autobiographical text is written in isiZulu, while by far the greater percentage of his own poetry is in English, relates palpably to the closed space of intimacy of the former document. In this sense, his writing (and not only his, but also that of his co-authors and the other inmates involved in the project) is an example of the complex of private and public language, of private and public voice, that these authors negotiate on a daily basis in their writing. The public language, then, is predominantly (although not exclusively) English; a language through which the writers seek to reach an imagined audience, beyond the walls of their present confinement, with the purpose of informing and educating this audience about conditions in prison, cautioning them about the consequences of crime (this is a complex issue and is heavily bound up with the motivations for their actions) and, lastly, strengthening those involved in the struggle for the recognition of their basic human rights – be they in prison themselves or in the broader community.

Since they are all second-language users of English from, in the main, severely disadvantaged economic and consequently educational backgrounds, a critical discussion of their literary production necessarily needs to consider the ways in which limited language skills may (or may not) limit the capacity of the material to convey meaning or to make the intended meaning clear. This is a complicated problem and involves a subtle balance between the integrity of the poem (in this case), respect for the assumed intentions of the author, and a sensitivity to the syntactic, grammatic and lexical flaws in the language-medium which could distort or obscure the message.

In many respects, the approach which I have adopted here to this particular problem is based on the issue of editorial intervention: when and to what extent does an editor intervene in a given text, and how do they determine the intentions of the author in order to more fully express these in the finished product? In this study I resolved to keep any editorial intervention to the absolute minimum. Sections from selected poems are represented in this study precisely as they appear in the original, and the full text is then included in the appendix. I have also not made use of any editorial markers such as italics or the Latin *sic* to draw the attention of the reader to any mistakes or oddities in the original text. Given the vast range in educational levels amongst the participants (from grade one to grade eleven), it is a testimony to the urgency and the force of their writing that hardly any of their poems are overburdened by language errors to the point of incomprehensibility. In fact, there are only rare instances where either the illegibility of the handwriting or the peculiarity of spelling render a word or phrase indecipherable.

Some of these poems have been published in literary magazines and collections, and this is the only material that has been edited. The published versions of these poems are used in the body of the research, but the originals (unedited) are represented in the appendix for comparative purposes. All original work by the prison writers referred to in this study is reflected in the appendix, located through the contents on page 95. A selection of letters from three of the writers to their friend, Morna Macleod, and to myself has also been included, as well as the typescripts of interviews I conducted with these men following their release. The teaching material used in the writing workshops (including photographs and poems) is also itemised in the appendix.

This research is my humble way of paying tribute to the courage and the conviction of these authors, and their remarkable capacity to transmute personal suffering into art.

CHAPTER TWO

Brief history of the poetry project: a personal reflection

The room where the prisoners and I meet is small and stuffy. The air is stale. Someone has thrown a regulation-issue grey blanket over the closed gate for privacy, or perhaps to block out the noise of the television downstairs. The rest of the men from this section are sitting below in the open communal area watching a violent video at almost full volume about a gang of female bank robbers. A couple of prison warders sit around on plastic chairs or on the tops of the shiny aluminum tables watching the film with them.

There are thirteen men, excluding myself, squashed into this hot, airless room: Bheki Mkhize, Vusi Mthembu, Sibusiso Majola, Winston Mzilikazi, Jabulani Sikhakane, Themba Vilakazi, Sipho Ntuli, Bheki Mchunu, Themba Zuma, Mlungisi Ghiya, Richard Mkhize, Ephraim Shange and Bonginkosi Mngadi. The men vary between the ages of nineteen and thirty-four.

It is our first meeting, and I do not think any of us, least of all myself, really knows what we are doing here. Is it because we share a love of poetry? But what is poetry? Is my understanding of poetry the same as theirs? We talk slowly and share slowly. The room is becoming hotter. The absence of fresh air is beginning to have an effect on me. I feel light-headed. But the men in their green pullovers and thick green shirts seem accustomed to it. They are still and attentive.

If I am honest with myself, then I must admit that I am not sure what I am trying to prove. That the act of writing words down onto a sheet of unlined paper with a blunt regulation pencil can be

transformatory, even emancipating? That poetry can be relevant to these men's lives, each of whom is serving an average of ten years for some form of violent crime? (I never enquire about their sentence or crime.) That poetry is not a luxury or a distraction from the viciousness of reality, but as basic and meaningful to their lives as a wedge of unbuttered bread?

But what do terms like "transformatory" and "emancipating" really signify in a context of the loss of an individual's autonomy and of his normal relations with other human beings? How does one evaluate the significance of writing and reading poetry against the overwhelming circumstances of mortification the inmate endures as "his privacy is invaded, he is programmed as a number and his old self is assaulted" (Cohen and Taylor 1972:56)? Indeed, in an institutional framework of prolonged sensory and perceptual deprivation, where such everyday issues as family, sex, friendship, privacy, time, identity and ageing are rendered problematic, even impossible, the idea of creative writing classes must seem inappropriate, if not impertinent.

Despite this, both common-law and political prisoners in South Africa have consistently demonstrated the enduring significance of writing as a way of enduring an extreme situation, of surviving. In 1975 Breyten Breytenbach was sentenced to nine years' imprisonment for terrorism. In an interview after his release in 1982, he said: "If I hadn't been able to write in prison I would have gone insane. It was the only way in which I could assimilate my experiences" (Mapanje 2002: 307). Pitika Ntuli, commenting on the poetry he wrote while in solitary confinement, reinforces and extends this idea: "When you write a piece of poetry, you try to find some order and some sanity. It is also an attempt to maintain contact with your people, as you have been completely removed from society" (Mapanje 2002:292). The unraveling of this need, this urgent expression of survival, is the purpose of this research.

2.1 Background to *We Waiting in the Dark*

In 1995 a friend (Richard Walne) and I published a poetry magazine, *Fidelities*, as part of Pietermaritzburg's first Spring Arts Festival. According to the foreword of the first volume, *Fidelities* "reflects the literary efforts of writers connected with this city [Pietermaritzburg] who, whether they be relatively inexperienced or frequently published poets, all share a love of the written word" (Moolman 1995:1). Press releases were published in local newspapers encouraging writers to submit their work to the Tatham Art Gallery, where I was then education officer.

At the end of that year I was approached by a retired Physical Education teacher, Morna Macleod, who gave me a collection of original poetry written by three young men, who she said were currently in prison. The manuscript, poignantly entitled *We Waiting in the Dark*, was a Faber-Castell Examination Pad, written in longhand on both sides of each sheet. Approximately seventy lined sheets of paper in the pad had been filled. Although the poems in the collection were composed by three different people it appears from the handwriting that one person had transcribed them all. They are all written in English, except for three in isiZulu.

A letter addressed to "Miss" (M. Macleod) accompanied the manuscript. It was written from the New Male Prison Medium 'A' and dated 5 August 1995. The letter was signed by Bheki Ernest Mkhize, Sipho S'phiwe Mkhize and Bhek'themba Sweetwell Mkhize (Mbhele). In the letter the three men thank Macleod for making "us to realise that we the human being and we still a society". The natural linkage the men set up in this statement between their humanity and the broader society beyond the prison walls points significantly towards a revitalized concept of the embattled self, a recurring theme in their poetry, and one of the dominant elements of this investigation into the spaces of opposition and difference created by their writing.

The three men go on to explain how they have turned the “exercise book” which Macleod gave them into “a poetry book, in other words we wrote a poems through it”. This was done, they argue, as “the only way of how to show the next coming generation and also our childrens”. Again, the emphasis placed here on the transformation of an ordinary and inconsequential object (an exercise book) into that which embodies meaning and power (a lesson for the “next coming generation”) is absolutely critical to their project of recovery.

Macleod brought me the manuscript hoping that *Fidelities* would be able to publish it. In their covering letter to her, the three men requested that she “contact any publisher you know, and kindly hand it [their collection] over to them to be published a poetry book”. *Fidelities*, however, did not have the infrastructure or finances to undertake the publication of an entire book of poetry, and the manuscript joined the growing pile of material I was being sent for consideration.

2.2 Art as therapy in the prisons

In June 1996 I received a visit from the head of the education section of the New Prison in Pietermaritzburg, Captain Thomas Dibakwane – a visit wholly unrelated to the three men and their collection of poetry. Captain Dibakwane wanted the Art Gallery to facilitate a programme of art and craft development workshops with a group of medium term (ten to fifteen years) male inmates. The Art Gallery has an active and socially responsible outreach mission and it took Captain Dibakwane’s request on board enthusiastically. Not to dispute his altruism, Captain Dibakwane’s request was in part also fueled by his desire to improve the quality and range of work entered by the New Prison for the annual NICRO arts and crafts competition.

From the Tatham Art Gallery’s perspective, however, the benefit of such a programme of classes

was more than functional. It even went beyond the possible later economic benefits to the men stemming from skills training. Instead, the Gallery regarded the creative engagement of inmates with modes of visual expression as intrinsically therapeutic.

From even before Aristotle art has been regarded as cathartic, as representing and initiating an activity of healing and reconciliation not just within the characters embodied in a particular story, but also within the artists themselves, the audience and the broader community. Through catharsis, the purging of what Aristotle called “pity and fear”, both artist and spectator are released from the cycle of suffering and restored to psychic and emotional equilibrium.

Avowedly therapeutic art, though, foregrounds the work as a transferred phenomenon that can be interpreted in a process of psychotherapy to illuminate the psychosis of an individual. In essence, then, the central emphasis in most therapeutic art is less on the aesthetics of the final product – the rarefied notion of the transcendent ‘art object’ – and more on the psychological processes of restoration and discovery undergone by an individual or group. The ‘art object’ is therefore seen more as a form of enabling space where the subjects are “accorded the dignity of helping to cure themselves” (Adamson 1984:2) than an autonomous manifestation of an individual or community’s self-expression and perception.

An art class would therefore not simply be the setting free of a spontaneous imaginative activity by the inmates, but rather facilitate an indirect process whereby an individual’s self-worth would be restored and sense of dignity bolstered through the recognition of his or her right to possess their own voice and experiences. Judith Tannenbaum, writing about the Arts in Corrections project in San Quentin Prison, elaborates:

People on the suffering end of most economic and social scales have grown up believing that what they say is unimportant or will not be valued. In order for speech to occur, a person must not only recognise his or her own unique voice and particular thoughts and feelings, but also believe that he or she has a right to express these perceptions. (2000:xi)

This ambition is appropriate to therapeutic work undertaken in any “complete and austere institution” (Baltard, in Foucault 1979:235) anywhere in the world. In South Africa, however, it is drawn more urgently by the particular nature of the South African prison system which, according to Breytenbach, has at its heart “the denial of the humanity of the other” and in that “it is only a reflection of the larger South African cosmos” (1984:247). The apartheid-era truism of prison as “the image of the outside society: a society without a moral core, based solely on the arbitrary distinction of a person’s skin colour” (Lewin 2002:259) might well have lost some of its force given the accession to power of the African National Congress in 1994, but continued overcrowding, violence and deprivation have made the experiences of inmates as acute as before.

In all, the Gallery made nine visits to the New Prison between July 1996 and the end of October that same year. The visits included workshops on basic life drawing, linocut printing and fabric painting. A guided tour of the Art Gallery took place on 2 September. The workshops also continued the following year. A programme of six instructional workshops was held with the same group in the prison between February and May 1997. These particular interventions introduced a range of artistic disciplines and allowed participants the opportunity of experimenting with a selection of expressive media. There was a preliminary course in still-life drawing, an introduction to dramatic performance, and a demonstration on how to make a ‘Jazz Can’ guitar out of a five-litre oil can.

2.3 Collaboration and memory in prison poetry

During one of these art classes I was surreptitiously handed a green envelope that contained a handwritten letter addressed to me from Sipho Mkhize. In the letter Mkhize requested that I contact a certain Miss Macleod who will “hand over to you my poetry book which should be published to the editors”. It was obvious that the poetry book to which he referred was, in fact, *We Waiting in the Dark*, the very book which Morna Macleod had given to me just over a year earlier. At this point Mkhize was in Medium ‘A’ section. He would have been strictly limited to writing only one letter of 500 words per month. Any other form of writing would have been severely curtailed, and punished with a loss of privileges, spare diet, solitary confinement or an addition to his sentence.

Enclosed in the letter from Mkhize were four poems; two in English and two in isiZulu. The poems were all signed at the bottom of each page: “From: Sipho, Bheki and Bhek’themba Mkhize”. In the letter Mkhize states that the four poems are “examples of my poetry book”. It is interesting that although he claims ownership of the book here, further in the letter he goes on to explain that the poems were “written *collaborated* [my own emphasis] with my brothers whom are my two co-accused”. His use of the word “collaborated” is particularly significant, establishing a tension between his earlier claims to individual and sole authorship (“*my* poetry book”) and a more social emphasis upon a communality of production, upon a collective vision of creativity and ownership. The convention of authorship – the complex interplay of the individual versus the communal, the personal and self-conscious stance of the poet as opposed to the social role of the *imbongi* (praise poet) as teacher or oral historian – is stretched and tested by the physical circumstances of the three men writing their work together in an overcrowded and noisy cell, without privacy. An intriguing anecdote of Sipho Mkhize sheds some light on the men’s novel

approach to composition within a context of incarceration and violence. In an unrecorded conversation after his release in 2000 I asked Sipho to explain how they practically collaborated on a poem. He tellingly replied that it was a bit like making tea; one person applied the hot water, another added sugar, while the third poured in the milk.

Although *Fidelities* was not in a financial position to publish the entire collection, *We Waiting in the Dark*, I selected three poems (one by each of the writers) for the third edition of the journal. “One Heart’s Family” by Bhek’themba Mbhele and “New Prison” by Sipho Mkhize appeared in *Fidelities III* (1997). The poem, “Hello Mum, I’m in Jail” by Bheki Mkhize, was also selected and is listed in the contents page of the journal, but an unfortunate error in the typesetting resulted in the poem not actually being included.

One Heart’s Family (extract)

Hey there, girls!
Where are you from?
Suddenly I remember who you are.
I remember where you are from.
You look like the lady guerrillas of Dambuza.
Will you give me one slogan?
Will you show me you are lady guerrillas?
After the uprising of dust, I will come,
After singing a freedom poem for me -
Your singing like the Soviet Cultural Group . . .

This poem by Bhek’themba Mbhele draws upon the powerfully recurring trope of memory in South African prison writing. The repetition of “I remember” is a means of re-connecting Mbhele with the self that existed before his imprisonment. It affirms the humanity of this self in relation to those (family members, loved ones, comrades) who have forgotten him. The poem recalls, in a gesture of struggle solidarity, the author’s role as youth activist in the Pietermaritzburg township

of Dambuza during the political violence that preceded and accompanied South Africa's transition to democracy after February 1990. Mbhele also signals to the insurrectionary development of alternate organs of popular self-rule in those black areas in which official state administration had collapsed. The re-naming of these areas became a mark not only of resistance to the state, but also of alternative political power. The township of Dambuza, on the edge of the Edendale Valley, was thus renamed the Soviet Union.

In 1998, the fourth edition of *Fidelities* featured the poem, "Hello Mum, I'm in Jail" by Bheki Mkhize. The launch of the volume took place on 8 May at the Hexagon Theatre on the campus of the then University of Natal. The three writers were granted permission by the Area Commissioner for the Department of Correctional Services to attend the launch, accompanied by two armed guards, and read their work.

2.4 Alternative cultural directions

A subsequent letter from Bhek'themba Mbhele (using the surname Mkhize) and Sipho Mkhize (24 November 1998), in which the authors express their gratitude for being included in the launch, also relates their earnest commitment to the practice of poetry: "We have learnt a lot to the other poets . . . To being involved in this Fidelity makes us to more developed our work (poetry). In this regard, our specific request to you is this, please don't forget us in each and every programme which involving poets. Because we are ready to proceed with the work of this nature even when we are out from prison."

The overwhelming urge for imaginative expression displayed by these authors – thinly educated in any formal literary tradition (Sipho Mkhize, in fact, went into prison possessing only one year

of formal schooling) – confounds the formal categories drawn between elitist notions of an autonomous ‘high’ art and ‘popular’ forms of expression, centered more on the precepts of witness, social responsibility and national reconstruction. As Kelwyn Sole comments: “There are any number of artistically viable forms, bred and nurtured among ordinary people, at times under appallingly adverse conditions, of which the cultural elite in this country is either totally unaware or scornful” (1994:3). Such challenges, moreover, force a re-examination of how we define culture and also how we understand the concept of literature. Michael Chapman draws a distinction between culture as “art expression or life expression” and between “texts of autonomy or texts of utility” (1994:iv). This area of study will be examined more critically in Chapter Three; suffice it for me to comment here that the binaries Chapman sets up between the two sets of categories are, in my opinion, too exclusionary to satisfy the alternative forms of imagining and expression that texts like the ones here researched generate.

In September of the same year, the daily Pietermaritzburg newspaper *The Natal Witness*, which for a short period experimented with the idea of running poetry on the leader page, printed Bheki Mkhize’s poem, “Hello Mum, I’m in Jail”. The poem was also published in the Johannesburg-based cultural journal, *Botsotso* (issue 10:1999).

Hello, Mum,
Mum, this world is not my home;
Mum, why was I named after my father?
Mum, was Daddy a rolling stone?
But I’ll take it to the limit
And talk about revolution and a fast car.

Mum, I’m the black angel
And the death song is built.
I feel like a hopeless child.
Oh! Mum,
I’m a victim of the same song I sing;
I wanted to be with my family,

But don't cry for me, cry for my children.
Mum, I'm in jail,
I'm waiting for my name to be called
To be called down to the register of masters.

Mum, I'm in jail.

The vaguely naive, offhand tone of the title advances one side of the dual narrative that Mkhize has interwoven into the poem. The intimate greeting in the first line, followed by the series of direct, ingenuous questions ("why was I named after my father?", "was Daddy a rolling stone?") continues this sense of the writer as a child, confounded by questions to which he has no answer. But his struggle with and for identity shifts then from the personal to the social: "But I'll take it to the limit / And talk about revolution". (References here to the lyrics of the popular singer Tracy Chapman, as well as the broader question of intertextuality, are explored in Chapter Six.) The adverse circumstances that enclose this project of self-definition or self-retrieval are now clearly revealed: "Mum, I'm the black angel / And the death song is built." Buried within the framework of what Breytenbach refers to as a "house of dying" (1984:49), Mkhize is left at the end of his poem, waiting, dependent, powerless. Raymond Suttner, sentenced to eight years' imprisonment under the Terrorism Act, characterizes prison life similarly as "a dependent and stripped down existence" (2001:60). He elaborates: "The entire framework of prison existence is aimed at turning the prisoner into a passive object – an object whose every movement, whether inside or outside his cell, is either determined by others or severely limited" (62).

It is essential to keep this dependent, objectified status of the prisoner – inserted into an institutional framework over which he has no control and little effect – continually in mind as we probe further the creative material produced in the Pietermaritzburg New Prison before, during and subsequent to the 1998 *Fidelities* Poetry Project.

CHAPTER THREE

A critical overview of the creative writing workshops

Emboldened by the material shown to me and by the enthusiasm of the three writers, I applied to the National Arts Council at the end of 1998 for funding to conduct a series of poetry writing workshops in the New Prison. The background to this Project has been examined, but it is important now to interrogate the pedagogical procedures and actual reference material utilized in the intervention.

As set out in the official funding application, the aims of the workshops were:

- i. To restore dignity and self-worth through the expression of emotions and ideas.
- ii. To encourage independent and critical thinking through personal creativity.
- iii. To popularise and promote the writing of poetry as a vehicle for self-expression and growth.
- iv. To foster an appreciation of South African literature, past and present.
- v. To encourage an understanding and tolerance of diverse ideas and forms of creative expression.
- vi. To facilitate the practice and development of language skills.

In order to explore critically the creative material produced by the participants in the workshops it is imperative, first, that my own aesthetic and cultural frame of reference – as outlined in the objectives above – as well as my pedagogic practice be brought into the foreground, and subjected to examination. For, as Jeremy Cronin made plain in his retort to Lionel Abrahams (who was

responding to Cronin's review of the COSATU poets featured in *Black Mamba Rising*, aesthetics is not "a neutral field of timeless values" (*Weekly Mail*, 16-23 April, 1987).

In the objectives stated above there is a clear privileging of the personal and private as opposed to the social. "Self worth", "personal creativity", "self expression" are all key determinants of a moral-humanism which finds its aesthetic outlet in the tenets and texts of New Criticism. From a particular perspective, this could be interpreted (to paraphrase Michael Chapman) as favouring the significance of the text above that of the context (1988:26). Again, such rather dogmatic differentiations between the individual and the collective, between text and context, fall sadly short, I will argue later, of the multiplicity of voices and modes of opposition which the poets discussed here exercise in their work. Moreover, as Kelwyn Sole rightly points out: "people respond to art as individuals, not only as readers, but also as part of any audience watching theatre or listening to poetry" (1994:9).

Of course, the rather naive assumption in item four that there exists a defined and generally agreed category known as 'South African literature' neatly skirts the question: according to whose terms is one thing literature and another not? Who is the arbiter of literature, and what are the criteria that they would use? As far back as the late seventies, Isabel Hofmeyr wrote:

Despite the yawning abysses that have yet to be researched in the history of South African literature, many critics are happy to slot into preconceived and erroneous ideas about South African literature, its genesis and development. To them there is already an established 'tradition' that is uncritically embraced as unproblematic and pristinely normative. It looks something like this. The kick-off date is about 1830 with Thomas Pringle, followed by a silence of fifty years. Next comes Olive Schreiner, then another leap to the 1920s with Millin, Plomer, van der Post and Campbell. Next in this peculiar pageant is Bosman, who acts as a transitional figure to slide us into the 50s and 60s with Paton, Cope, Jacobson and Gordimer. The project is then presumably suitably rounded off by reference to a few contemporary writers. (1979:39)

It is clearly not within the scope of this study to do justice to the complex implications arising out of Hofmeyr's challenge to the privileging (in a South African cultural context) of high literary art. Aspects of this argument will be examined in greater detail in Chapters Six and Seven. It must be pointed out at this juncture, though, that the issue of evaluative comparisons of equality and inequality between cultural texts (and the contestations of power and knowledge implicated therein) is inextricably bound up with the notion of nationhood and national unity in the post-apartheid South Africa, and with the imaginative process of self-transformation experienced by the six prison writers examined in this study.

I will return now to the account of the genesis of the prison poetry project. After several meetings with various officials of the Department of Correctional Services, permission for the writing project was granted. On 10 March 1999 I addressed over a hundred inmates from Section G in the New Prison. This section is the so-called education wing of the prison where inmates who were currently doing some form of correspondence course were kept. Thirteen men came forward at the end of the meeting to register for the workshops. (Their names were listed at the beginning of Chapter Two.) It was unfortunate that Sipho Mkhize and Bhek'themba Mbhele were not part of the group, since they had been transferred earlier to Seville Prison. Bhek'i Mkhize, however, played a pivotal role in the workshops, helping to broker trust between me and the group and also assisting with translation.

3.1 Time and the door

I opened the workshop with a poem by Wopko Jensma, "Door", from his first collection, *Sing for our Execution* (1973). The poem was selected for a number of reasons. Firstly, it was short, direct and, without patronizing the reader, made use of clear and simple language. I made it plain to the

group that although I could only speak and read and write English, this should not prevent them communicating in their own mother tongue. I drew on the language resources of the group itself when someone did not understand what I was saying (or what I had handed out to them), or vice versa. Secondly, although not actually evident in this particular poem, Jensma's work also demonstrates a multi-lingual facility that cuts across cultural and even economic striations. He frequently exploits the rich, rough phraseology of *tsotsi-taal*, which itself draws heavily on an adapted Afrikaans. I explained to the group that Jensma resisted the notion of 'poetic' language (separate from ordinary speech), which was appropriate only to the writing of poetry, and that they should therefore feel comfortable writing as they spoke.

Thirdly, the poem also turns around two central motifs – the idea of Time and the sign of the Door – which my reading in prison literature, as well as my contact with the writing of the three men previously mentioned, confirmed as pivotal in the experience of a totalizing spatial and temporal environment. In fact, the most frequently used metaphor to describe prison experience is the temporal one. Breyten Breytenbach writes: "Prisoners are obsessed by time. One 'does time', or you push it. You are a 'timer'. The best wish you can emit is: *roll on time*! We used to say that magistrates and judges are most spendthrift with other people's time: they are time-stealers" (1984:126). The idea of Time – the ownership and control of personal time by the rhythms of what Erving Goffman terms a "total institution" (1978) – is expressed succinctly, too, in *A Simple Lust* by Dennis Brutus (1973) where he laments "the greyness of isolated time" ("Letters to Martha") and "cement-grey days / cement-grey time" ("On the Island").

Similarly, the sign of the Door – a marker of involuntary incarceration – protests the powerlessness of the speaker in the poem at the same time as it enounces his earnest appeal for

human recognition and acceptance. Raymond Suttner describes the effect of being shut in by the steel door of Durban Central Prison:

I had never seen a door as massive and heavy as the steel one that shut behind me in Durban Central Prison. It shocked me in a way that the loudly crashing doors in detention had failed to do. There was something very final about the way it closed. This door was at once a physical barrier to movement and symbolic of a change in my life. My previous life was now excluded, part of the 'outside'. In the years that lay ahead, my life now belonged to the 'inside'. (2001:34)

3.2 Praise poetry in a contemporary context

The second workshop was held a week later on 18 March. Out of the original thirteen only five men attended. My previous experience of working in a prison (in 1996) taught me not to be unduly alarmed by sudden and dramatic fluctuations in attendance, or to interpret these as in any way an indicator of value or interest. Within prison there is a surprising movement of inmates between sections, as well as constant demands upon their time for a range of internal administrative functions, from parole interviews and visits to clinic staff to basic cleaning and maintenance duties; not to mention the competing attractions of sport and cultural activities (singing and traditional dancing).

In the first session I focused specifically on the oral tradition of praise poetry or *izibongo* (singular, *isibongo*). While I, clearly, have been schooled in the Romantic-Idealist tradition of the written word – what Michael Chapman terms “intense lyrics in the Western mode of personal utterance” (2003:334) – I must emphasise that this literary tradition has never precluded an appreciation of non-literate forms of expression; on the contrary, one consequence of this tradition has in fact been a deeper awareness of the “complex cultural intersections and hybridizations of South African social and literary life” (Brown 1998:218), and therefore a desire, in terms of the writing workshops specifically, to provide a learning space where a variety of poetic traditions or

voices could be heard.

In an interview with Kirsten Holst Petersen, Mzwakhe Mbuli explains that his own mode of performance poetry is part of a distinct African poetic tradition: “What I am saying is that our traditional literature is oral. The poets used to appear before chiefs and kings, and they used to do that without writing anything down or reading it out, so my poetry could be an update of that. The tradition has a dynamism, it is not static, it has changed and developed” (1991:68). While defining the African poetic tradition as oral, Mbuli also points to the ways in which this tradition had been re-established and re-fashioned in South Africa, largely to aid the mobilisation and conscientisation of black people under apartheid.

Liz Gunner has demonstrated how “in the decade leading up to the 1994 South African elections there was a significant energising of the national debate and of the liberation struggle within the country through the use of praise poetry” (Gunner 1999:56). Ari Sitas, too, in the groundbreaking collection of worker poets, *Black Mamba Rising*, comments on the way “oral poetry, thought by many to be a dead tradition or the preserve of chiefly praises, resurfaced as a voice of ordinary black workers and their struggles” (1986:3).

A key element in the oral poetic tradition which emerged during the workshops, and which has a crucial bearing on my discussion of originality and authenticity later in this chapter, is the idea of authorial reflectivity and function: the ways in which a given author’s persona unifies the text and limits the proliferation of meaning and contradiction by the imposition of a claim to individual ownership as a result largely of personal imaginative creation. In her article, “(Dis)Locating Selves: *Izibongo* and Narrative Autobiography in South Africa”, Judith Lütge Couille argues:

While the author of narrative autobiography is responsible for a fixed, authentic, and original text, the subject of the praise poem is not responsible for the poem in the same way, in part because it is not necessarily entirely or even partially self-composed, in part because it changes in response to different performance contexts, but perhaps more importantly because it is not a commodity. Authorship is thus largely irrelevant. (1999:70)

Lütge Couille makes plain here the intricate range of nuances surrounding the notion of authorship in oral literature and, in particular, the “non-subjectivised, non-psychologised world” (71) of the ‘author’ of the praise poem. This network of nuances, operating without a “specified point of view” (71) and significantly divested of an individualised, centralizing ‘voice, is crucially not only a feature of oral poetry, but also of the imaginative self presented in the writings of the prison poets examined in this study. I will return to this discussion in greater depth in Chapter Six.

3.3 Writing from photographs

At the close of the first session a worksheet was distributed to the participants. This worksheet, which formed the basis of practical writing exercises in class and also for ‘homework’, consisted of a selection of black and white photographs and five examples of contemporary South African poetry (Appendix: 103-114).

As a group the inmates examined the first photograph by Helen Aron from *Staffrider* (July/August 1978). They began by simply describing everything they saw in the picture, making a list of all the visual details; the time of day, the season, the location of the image (whether it was a rural or an urban setting). Not only was this a way of building up all the evidence that they would use later to probe beneath the surface of the picture and tease out some of its ‘deeper meanings’, but it also indirectly exercised their own observation skills which had been blunted through institutional neurosis and regression, or simply as a means of survival. Paradoxically, it is precisely because,

as Breytenbach argues, “prison is the absolute stripping away of all protective layers: sounds are raw, sights are harsh, smells are foul” (1984:234), that this closing off to sensations takes place. By focusing the men’s attention on the minutiae of the image, I hoped also to provide them with a store of ‘raw material’ which they could draw upon later in writing their own creative work.

The group then focused on the male figure in the centre of the picture, playing a guitar. Participants were encouraged to ask questions about the musician: why was he sitting under the tree on his own, what was his mood like? Each member of the group then had to imagine what kind of song the musician was playing. And also why he was playing this particular song. For homework the participants had to write the song that the man in the photograph was singing. The exercise was designed to challenge and develop the imaginative skills of the participants, by encouraging them to think themselves into the life of another, fictitious, person. In this way, interestingly, the figure of the musician in the photograph also became a vehicle for the participants’ own feelings and thoughts – things which they dared not ordinarily expose in the brutalising environment of the prison.

Four men attended the third workshop held on 24 March. Principles of trust, sharing and non-judgment were discussed. Sibusiso Majola read out the poem that he had written based on the photograph by Helen Aron. In his poem, “Beautiful of the Nature”, Majola reflects upon the relationship between humankind and nature. He depicts the figure of the musician staring intently at something we do not see: “when I look at this man / he thinking so deep about / something that he never / know where that thing / come from”. Majola then goes on to suggest that the musician is contemplating a mountain: “and he consenstrate / to that thing maybe it’s big / mountain confront him”. He says that the musician is singing seriously about the mountain and about “something that

/ confusing many people". In stanza three this song about the mountain becomes an explicit metaphor for the musician's questioning of the purpose of his own existence and of the origin of God and nature:

If I guess the song
says where that thing
came from who create
that it's God at the same
time he found another
question where God came
from God created by nature
what about nature?

The mountain is a persuasive image, and one that straddles a broad existential concern and a narrow focus on the author's own specific predicament as a prisoner; hence it is both a place to which Majola goes to find answers (as frequently portrayed in a variety of religious texts), as well as a symbol of a long journey or an arduous and testing experience.

I arranged that the next workshop would be conducted by the poet and former *Echo* journalist, Piwe Mkhize, who would present some of the poetry of his late brother, Mlungisi Mkhize. The men were excited by this as some of them knew the work of Mlu Mkhize which had appeared quite frequently in the *Echo* Poetry Corner. Between 1986 and 1994 the Pietermaritzburg daily newspaper, *The Natal Witness*, published poetry in its weekly supplement, *Echo*, which is addressed largely to a black readership. The work of Mlungisi Mkhize had also been published posthumously in *One Calabash, One Gudu* (1990). I distributed copies of the poem which formed the title of the collection, and asked the participants to read it before the next meeting. They were also asked to consider the second photograph on the worksheet: "In a kitchen, Killarney, Orlando West, Soweto" by David Goldblatt from *Staffrider* (September/October 1980).

At the next meeting, on 1 April, Piwe Mkhize performed the work of his late brother to an enthusiastic response. The poems were dramatised with a combination of actions, facial expressions and sound effects, turning what is essentially a mental experience (reading the poems in silence on the page) into an aural / visual experience of performance; remarkably akin to the oral performance of the *imbongi* or praise poet. Mkhize also recited his own translation into isiZulu of a poem by Don Mattera, “Do you Remember?”, from his collection *Azanian Love Song* (1994). Mkhize recited the poem in both English and isiZulu. The trope of memory, as demonstrated earlier, is a cogent indicator of the ‘outside’ world in prison literature and this, combined with the author’s description of a woman’s first sexual experience, brought an exuberant response from the participants.

3.4 “The Cavity of Shame”: views on originality

Sibusiso Majola, who had written so cogently on the first picture, then recited his poem, “Inside the Cavity of Shame”, which he had written on the photograph by David Goldblatt. (The version below was edited and published by me in *Fidelities* VII, 1999, under the title, “The Cavity of Shame”. Two previous drafts by Majola appear in the appendix.)

A woman and a man
are sitting like people who
have a shortage of something
and inside their cavity things
are not in a good condition.

If I take a look at the man
there is a table behind
the man and there is another
one in front. On that table
there is something that is not
put in order oh! a cold
cavity.

The man wears a jacket inside
his cavity, that shows it's cold
and the woman sits on a seat
of shame. Next to her there is
a kettle and mug that must be
on the table and she sits
like a person who needs help
or a person who feels cold.

Yes! It is cold inside the
cavity of shame and these
people they look unhappy
and they look like people
like people who desire for
something or they're waiting
for somebody who can
come and help them to
help themselves
to make things happen
to make their cavity to
be comfortable. Some
people say God helps those
who help themselves.

Majola's cold "cavity of shame" operates in a similar fashion to the trope of the "mountain" in his earlier poem, "Beautiful of the Nature". The small kitchen is given the significant value of an emblem that operates between the functional and the metaphoric levels; between the room simply as itself and the room as symbolic vehicle for a range of associations around imprisonment.

Beginning with a detailed, methodical description of the small, cramped kitchen, packed with domestic utensils, Majola carefully sketches a depiction of urban poverty and over-crowdedness. He sets up the "cavity" as an unconventional, but potent, image that draws toward itself a variety of bitter associations: claustrophobia, darkness, the cold, isolation. This translates directly into Majola's own plight as a prisoner in a locked cell, "embalmed in time" (Brutus 1973:72), "buried to what [he] know[s] as normal life outside" (Breytenbach 1984:108). It recalls James Matthews'

description of imprisonment in his collection *Poems from a Prison Cell* (2001):

the day has died on me
its remains wrapped
in a grey shroud
loneliness colder
than the grave
makes my cell
a frost-bound place . . .

(“The Day has Died on Me”)

Majola’s “cavity of shame”, personalized through the two destitute figures (and the associations of incarceration with himself), also reads as a national trope of powerlessness and abjectness. Ndaba, commenting on the lines, “They and I come from down there below / Down there below the bottom” in Mongane Serote’s *Yakhal’inkomo*, writes: “ ‘Below the bottom’ is symbolic of the abyss-like hole of despair into which the black people have sunk” (1996:74). The question of agency, of resistance to victimhood, is significant here. Against the “abyss-like hole of despair”, Majola posits a subtle (perhaps not wholly convincing) argument. In the conclusion of the poem he wavers between two related but unequal positions. The man and the woman are depicted as “waiting / for somebody who can / come and help them to / help themselves”, while at the same time he states that “some / people say God helps those / who help themselves” – implying (although ambiguously) that agency is in their own hands, rather than dependent on anyone else.

It is insightful to study the three versions of Majola’s poem that have been included here (the published version on page 29, and the two drafts in the appendix). None of the other material documented in this study exists in draft format, and a careful examination of the three drafts of “The Cavity of Shame” reveals valuable information on the process of composition, the assumptions of poetic convention the author considers appropriate, and the degree and kind of

intervention brought about by me in editing the piece for publication.

The original draft of the poem is headed “Picture Interpretation”, and is written in the handwriting of Majola, who also signed the poem with his full name at the bottom. Two issues spring to mind when first examining this draft. Firstly, the arrangement of the lines follows the convention of prose rather than the broken line-unit of what is customarily assumed to be poetry. Secondly, the draft has been heavily corrected. Spelling mistakes, grammatical errors and phraseology have been edited in a different handwriting to that of the author. This suggests that Majola gave his poem to someone he assumed possessed the English language skills he lacked in order to ‘correct it’. (I have not been able to find out who this anonymous ‘editor’ was, but I surmise that it was one of Majola’s fellow prisoners.) Bheki Mkhize, Bhek’themba Mbhele and Sipho Mkhize had a similar request to Morna Macleod in the covering letter to their collection, *We Waiting in the Dark*. In fact, Bheki Mkhize revealed in an interview that he and his brothers always discussed any new work amongst themselves in the same process of examination and criticism: “Each and every one when he finished to write a poem he have to produce it in front of us. We sit together. Let’s see this poem. Okay. Sometimes there’s a mistake there. Maybe I’ll correct them. Maybe they’ll correct me. That’s how we work” (Interview 7, 2003:206).

This collaborative practice of creative production, and the associated implications for authorship and aesthetic evaluation, is one of the key elements in the enlarging of contemporary South African cultural studies to which I propose that the work of this group of prisoners is importantly contributing. Their writing also focuses attention on the multiple strategies of resistance and renewal which alterity can adopt, ranging from the present and the individual to the social discourse of the future. The issue of the writer’s projection of themselves into the future will be

taken up in Chapter Five.

The second draft of “The Cavity of Shame” displays an awareness by Majola of a sense of poetic judgment, and the manipulation of poetic devices to achieve a deliberate, desired effect. This “literary competence”, Jonathan Culler argues, is the result of a set of conventions for reading and writing creative texts which the author has absorbed and deployed: “Choices between words, between sentences, between different modes of presentation will be made on the basis of their effects; and the notion of effect presupposes modes of reading which are not random or haphazard” (1975:116). The question of where Majola learnt these conventions – whether from his peers, from school or his own reading – is difficult to answer, and probably more the result of accumulated exposure and familiarisation than any single direct source.

Majola rejects a number of the alterations brought about by his anonymous ‘editor’. He rescues several of his original phrases which the ‘editor’ had deleted, and alters the position of other phrases in order to enhance their dramatic impact. The phrase, “Oh! A cold cavity” is moved from the beginning of stanza two (Appendix:99) to the end of the newly-constituted second stanza (Appendix:100).

The stanza breaks in the first draft are haphazard and ill-considered (perhaps emerging so in a burst of composition, to be revised later), while the second draft reveals a careful consideration of the logic of his argument as he divides the poem into four units, each unified by its own internal proposition. Majola also breaks up the long, prosaic lines of his first draft into the conventionally broken typography of poetry. The breaks in the lines, though, do not appear to follow any particular logic or to have been made with any consideration for emphasis, suspense or rhythm.

In several instances the lines break off on so-called ‘weak’ endings (a, the, its, etc). Of course, it can be argued that my criticism reveals less about the poet’s talents and more about my own New Critical assumptions about the ‘suitable’ arrangement of poetic lines.

3.5 Towards an alternative poetic tradition

“The Cavity of Shame” was published in *Fidelities* VII (1999). A brief comparison of the published version of the poem (edited by myself) and of Majola’s own final draft is important. My reading of the poetry composed by these men during the workshops and also before my intervention (in the case of the three brothers) is undeniably filtered through my own largely Western, academically-trained notion of what constitutes poetry and what does not. All these men – to borrow Chapman’s argument on Matshoba, Tlali and Kuzwayo – were “thinly educated in any literary tradition. It is the compulsion of their testimonies rather than the art of the genre that has shaped their voices into expressive forms” (2003:376).

Of course, this does not mean that the men had no tradition of poetry whatsoever. Culler argues that “to write a poem or a novel is immediately to engage with a literary tradition or at the very least with a certain *idea* [my emphasis] of the poem or the novel” (1975:116). The men were all aware of the work of Mlungisi Mkhize, amongst other writers published in *Echo*; they were familiar with the work of Mzwakhe Mbuli and the so-called Worker Poets like Alfred Qabula; they were also well-educated in the oral tradition of the *imbongi* (one prisoner recited a praise poem composed on the battle of Isandlwana). Presumably too they would have had some contact at school with the English tradition (however limited). I will return to these arguments in Chapter Six, but it is crucial at this juncture to outline, even sketchily, a fundamental principle (in terms of the writing and the reading of poetry) from which the prison writers and I operated.

Any simple polarity between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ notions of poetry was considered inimical to the larger project of encouraging the men to write their own creative material. Such hierarchical distinctions would end up perpetuating the very binaries which, I am arguing here, the prison writings themselves confound. South Africa, according to Nuttall and Michael, is “a place striking for its imbrication of multiple identities – identities that mythologies of apartheid and of resistance to it, tended to silence” (2000:1). It is the new forms of imagining – based upon a revisioning of identity in their writing – that I find so appealing in contemporary cultural practice, and the dissolving of distinctions between accepted aesthetic categories that I find so challenging to the dogmatic discourses of ‘committed’ versus ‘transcendent’ literature.

In fact, it is this revisioning of identity, this re-shaping of his fixed life through words, that Majola implicitly articulates in a poem like “The Cavity of Shame”, and this is why (in a simple comparison of the edited, published version of the poem and the original) the power in the original is sustained despite, and not because of, the very minor corrections to English spelling and syntax which I made.

At the following workshop, Themba Vilakazi recited his long poem “Diversity in Despair”. The poem draws heavily on the oral tradition of praise poetry, but also has powerful elements of a Christian evangelical practice in the shouted repetitions, harsh self-accusation and chorus of remorse. The heightened, dramatic appeal of its opening lines, “Fellow country-men, noble South Africans” owes much to the communal form of address or system of hailing pertinent to the Xhosa and Zulu *izibongo*. At the same time, though, there are rather intriguing gestures toward the Shakespearean tradition, as in Mark Antony’s famous address to the citizens of Rome in *Julius Caesar*. Vilakazi’s use of repetition and parallelism to aid the rhythm and emotional emphasis of

the poem is a feature of the *izibongo*, while the rhyming harmony in “ungodly”, “ungovernable”, “ungrateful”, “unhallowed” also recalls the alliteration and assonance used so effectively (but by no means exclusively) in the oral poetic tradition.

At this point, I had no way of knowing that this would be our final workshop. The Head of the Prison, Mr du Plessis, was transferred and he was replaced by Mr Ngubo. I had decided (with hindsight, unwisely) to arrange a public airing of the material produced by the prisoners thus far. I felt that if their work could be broadcast on the local radio station, Radio Maritzburg (read by the men themselves) then they would receive a sense of the shared and respectful community of which their work was a serious part, and the Pietermaritzburg public would also have an opportunity for a fresh insight into this much-maligned sector of society.

The new Head of the Prison, however, not only turned down my request for the men to broadcast their poetry (which could easily have been recorded in the prison itself), but also ordered that the workshop programme should cease. Countless meetings in order to persuade him of the educational and rehabilitatory merits of the programme proved fruitless. He felt that the writing of the men could reflect negatively on the institution of the prison and, since I would not undertake to censor the men in what they wrote, I had no alternative except to end the project.

CHAPTER FOUR

The socio-political context of *We Waiting in the Dark*

The collection of poems, *We Waiting in the Dark*, written by Bheki Mkhize, Sipho Mkhize and Bhek'themba Mbhele during their imprisonment, is a way of bearing witness to the harsh conditions in the prisons of Pietermaritzburg, Dundee and Durban, where the men served their sentences. As Ike Moshetsi wrote of the poets in the *Echo* Poetry Corner, their writing “acted as a form of release for the poets, where they could express their innermost feelings about their conditions, express great emotions and communicate with people in similar circumstances” (2002: 33). At the same time, the poems of the three men were also an important channel of emotional and psychological release for their disturbing experiences during the resistance struggle against apartheid in Pietermaritzburg, and their hopes for the future, both on a personal and national level.

It is therefore vital to examine the political and social context within which their creativity occurred, and which lent their words their peculiar force and integrity. At the same time it is important to note that their writing was never simply the proscribed reflection of an otherwise totally overwhelming context. Indeed, as we will discover, it is the complex interplay of imagined voices engaged in a resuscitation of power and identity that charges their words so powerfully with alternative strategies of individual and societal renewal in a post-apartheid South Africa.

4.1 Youth activism in the political struggle

Historically, the black youth in South Africa – African, Indian and coloured – experienced both acute social problems and exposure to constant political upheaval. One of the most striking

features of the popular rebellion which swept across South Africa from the early seventies was the centrality of the youth in extra-parliamentary resistance. In its broadest sense, the category of 'youth' includes children of pre-school age right through to young adults. As Shaun Johnson comments, the term "connotes the most energetic, volatile and impatient elements of the black communities" (1988:95). He continues:

[All] the youth share a particular background – subject to political and national oppression and exploitation. This is manifested at all levels of life . . . in the schools, in the factories, and in the townships. [This is] the nature of the society we all live under. (96)

Extreme poverty, little prospect of eventual employment and an intense politicisation of society provided potent conditions for the growth of a generational consciousness in South Africa. The formation of youth and student congresses in the townships in the early eighties coincided with the rapid development of similarly-orientated community organisations, including a range of popular groupings from trade unions, civic associations to church and women's groups. In 1983 these wide-ranging structures came together in the broad-based umbrella resistance movement of the United Democratic Front. One commentator, Martin Murray, noted:

The formation of the UDF and the National Forum marked a turning point in the political complexion of popular opposition. These popular organisations rode the crest of a groundswell of localized agitation. They represented a new correlation of social forces that had grown up in the townships. The inability or unwillingness of the white minority regime to fundamentally address the visible grievances that had sparked the Soweto uprising alienated and angered growing numbers of township residents. (1987:197)

The structure of the UDF lent itself to decentralisation and encouraged localised initiatives, an approach which clearly attracted many young blacks who were at the same time impressed by the weight of the Congress tradition. As Shaun Johnson sums up:

The period 1983-84 was a critical time of expansion and preparation for the youth movements, particularly those aligned with the UDF . . . The youth component of resistance made tremendous organisational strides, translating a spreading militant

generational consciousness into structures – however rudimentary – in schools and townships throughout South Africa. (1988:113)

These militant youngsters, loosely referred to as ‘the comrades’ or *amaqabane*, not only bore the brunt of sometimes vicious street fighting against the security forces, gangsters and vigilante militias, but they frequently directed community resistance and strategy in the absence of the older political leadership who had either been forced underground or detained. A generic, ill-defined term, ‘comrade’, like ‘young lion’, came to be used to refer to almost any black youngster

at the forefront of the confrontation between the state and the people . . . on the educational front and in community campaigns . . . for planning and execution it was the young people who put up posters, organized meetings, went from house to house. In the formation of street committees, defence committees, they were in the forefront and most visible. They were also the first to be detained, the first to be shot. (Johnson 1988:118)

4.2 “Towards people’s power”: self rule in the townships

From the second half of 1984, an unprecedented popular rebellion against the South African state gathered impetus, fueled largely by resistance to government initiatives such as the Tricameral Parliament, and by organised campaigns to establish popular, alternative structures of control over township life. This signaled a strategic shift amongst ANC strategists from promoting ‘ungovernability’ to implementing self-rule or ‘people’s power’ in those areas where community councillors had lost control or been forced to resign.

If, according to analyst Kumi Naidoo, “the resistance movement was to intensify and mature [then] new, democratic and effective control had to imposed to replace state control” (1988:184). The central task was to create ‘self-governing areas’ or ‘semi-liberated zones’ where people could exercise power, according to Zwelakhe Sisulu, “by starting to take control over their own lives in areas such as crime, the cleaning of the townships and the creation of people’s parks, the

provision of first aid and even in the schools” (in Naidoo 1988:184). The basic unit of local ‘self rule’ in the townships was the ‘street committee’. Describing the effectiveness of these committees Howard Barrell writes:

Because of their nature and (small) size, they readily lent themselves to clandestine forms of activity, and could promise a considerable growth in the distribution and power of underground networks . . . Moreover, they were organs in which people could experience democracy within the ‘struggle’ itself. Their range of concerns could span from national issues to the day-to-day problems of individuals and families. (1988:61)

A further symbol of the attempt to seize control of township life from the state was the controversial phenomenon of ‘people’s courts’. In an apparent attempt to wrest political power away from the legal institutions of the state, activists encouraged township residents not to report township crime to the police, but to ‘disciplinary committees’ or ‘people’s courts’ run by the community itself. In theory, street committees would elect representatives to a local ‘people’s court’, which would pass judgment on issues ranging from the ownership or grazing of a goat to marital disputes and political offences. Necessarily held in secret (and self-evidently illegal) these makeshift courts – also referred to as forums – could be convened at any time. Critics, however, pointed to the courts’ arbitrary nature and susceptibility to abuse, dubbing them ‘kangaroo courts’ and accusing some ‘judges’ or ‘chairpersons’ of passing the death sentence on political (sometimes even sexual) rivals for allegedly being informers.

In this atmosphere of heady excitement and of non-accountability to a largely absent political leadership, some elements within the youth came to regard themselves alone as ‘leaders of the struggle’ and beyond criticism or responsibility to the broader community. These elements exploited the political legitimacy of the comrades by extorting money from township residents, ostensibly for political campaigns, but in fact for their own enrichment. Dubbed the *comtsotsis*,

they were nothing but gangs of opportunistic and in fact apolitical thugs.

By early 1987, attention was necessarily focused on the need to develop 'people's self-defence militias' or 'defence committees' to protect the organs of popular self rule against the security forces, rival political organisations and gangsters. But the constant turmoil on the streets and in the schools left communities battle-weary and enervated. Concerned civic organisations and church groups frequently called attention to the widespread problem of psychological brutalisation amongst the youth.

4.3 Violence in Natal

The history of the violent conflict in Natal and especially the area around Pietermaritzburg during the decade from 1985 to 1995 is complex and riven by political allegiances. It is not in the scope of this research to determine the causes for the conflict or to apportion blame. The fact is that from the mid 1980s until well after South Africa's transition to democracy on 27 April 1994, thousands of people died as a result of political violence in the Midlands region, and thousands more were injured, had their homes destroyed or were forced to become refugees.

Irrefutably, though, the history of the violence is inextricably bound up with the two major political parties in the region: Inkatha (in mid-1990 renamed the Inkatha Freedom Party), the governing political party in the KwaZulu Legislative Assembly, originally established as a 'Zulu' cultural organization; and the UDF, comprising in the Pietermaritzburg region, the Edendale, Imbali, Ashdown and Sobantu youth organisations, and COSATU, the independent Congress of South African Trade Unions.

Ike Moshoeetsi, in his account of the role of the *Echo* Poetry Corner in the political conflict in the Natal Midlands, states:

The UDF and Inkatha were miles apart in terms of their policies and the way they saw issues. The UDF continued the ANC tradition of a popular mass struggle; it differed radically from Inkatha, which was seen as moderate. The UDF believed in a policy of non-collaboration with apartheid-created institutions, whilst Inkatha participated in these institutions. There were also sharp differences on key issues like school boycotts, stay-aways and international trade sanctions. (2002:25)

However, despite the irrefutable role played in the conflict by these two major political parties, several other factors related to the influence of criminal elements and the impact of socio-economic conditions on people living in townships around Pietermaritzburg also need to be taken into consideration. These precipitating conditions, according to Anthea Jeffrey (1997) and John Aitchison (1993), included housing shortages and the growth of shack settlements; high transport costs, leading to bus boycotts; the excision of Imbali and Ashdown townships from the Pietermaritzburg municipality; the role of Inkatha-supporting town councillors in state-imposed black local authorities; school unrest and rent and service boycotts; the rise of vigilante groups associated with Inkatha and backed by the police; the intolerance of opposition by KwaZulu / Inkatha authorities; conflict between the United Democratic Front and the Black Consciousness movement; and the 1985 and 1986 national States of Emergency which saw the UDF as the main target of the security forces, while Inkatha flouted the emergency regulations at will.

Successful consumer boycotts and work stayaways organised by the UDF and COSATU at the beginning of 1987, against which Inkatha had campaigned very actively, threatened the power-base of Inkatha and the credibility of its claim to represent the black people of Natal. Fearing that it was losing its political legitimacy, Inkatha responded aggressively by mounting massive recruitment drives in areas around Pietermaritzburg. These forced recruitments into Inkatha were

resisted in many communities by the formation of 'defence committees' organized along the lines of 'street committees'. The proclamation of these areas as 'liberated zones' by the progressive youth attracted even further aggressive attention from Inkatha and yet more violent resistance.

With the growth and strengthening of the UDF and Cosatu, Moshetsi writes:

the apartheid regime also stepped up its security and repressive measures. The police were given wide-ranging powers to deal with the opponents of apartheid . . . Many townships became occupied zones as the regime sent its troops into the townships. Detention without trial and the torture and killing of activists were widespread. Freedom of the press was also curtailed. (2002:28-29)

Allegations of security force collusion on the side of Inkatha in the murder and mayhem were widespread, but difficult to prove in a court of law, with witnesses being intimidated and even assassinated. Inkatha warlords who were known to be involved in the killings were neither arrested nor detained, or if they were detained they would be released shortly afterwards. On the other hand many UDF activists were detained for lengthy periods under Emergency regulations. Inkatha was also tacitly allowed to hold rallies and mass meetings in flagrant contravention of the same regulations which proscribed the UDF.

David Maughan Brown concludes that the dramatic escalation of the violence in the early nineties would seem likely, at least in part,

to have been the result of desperate last-ditch attempts by Inkatha to establish Buthelezi's position as a serious contender for political power, or at least as a crucial participant in any negotiating process, in the face of the massive groundswell of popular support for Mandela and the ANC in the immediate aftermath of their respective release and unbanning. (1991:51)

As Inkatha steadily lost control of urban areas, the process was accompanied by periods of intense violence in which both sides participated and in which accusations of security force complicity on the side of Inkatha abounded. The so-called Seven Days War in Pietermaritzburg (25-31 March

1990), in which huge groups of Inkatha supporters were allowed to rampage virtually unhindered through areas of Vulindlela, Caluza and Ashdown, is a notorious example. In some areas, notably Richmond and Table Mountain outside Pietermaritzburg, there were excesses and atrocities committed by both sides, with massacres of whole families, women and children, becoming more commonplace.

The assassination, too, of high-profile political leaders in the Natal Midlands – such as Chief Hlabunzima Maphumulo of the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (Contralesa), and Reggie Hadebe and S’khumbuzo Ngwenya of the UDF in Pietermaritzburg – further heightened the conflict, inciting a terrifying spiral of revenge attacks and counter-attacks that has left a generation of traumatized victims in its wake.

4.4 The testimony of autobiography

It is against this background that I will proceed to an examination of select poems in the collection *We Waiting in the Dark*, relating them to seminal events in both the private and the social world of the writers. In an evocative manner the poems, as Maughan Brown writes of the *Echo* poets, serve “to make the human cost of the [Pietermaritzburg] conflict real in ways that political analysis and statistical data, however instructive, cannot” (1991:49).

At the same time, though, the poems refuse simple classification as literary sociology, as “only one text among many from which information about the opinions or ideology of a certain group can be gleaned” (Holst Petersen 1991:iii). Indeed, I propose that the testimony of autobiography performed by the almost ninety poems in the collection produces the beginnings of a restoration of voice, self and world that the monologic, seemingly omnipotent discourse of the prison sets out

to deny officially. Article 44 (1) (f) of the Prisons Act (no 8 of 1959) has long been used to prohibit the publication of any information about prison conditions or the experience of imprisonment. (Of course, it could be argued that the three brothers were subject to a double form of silencing and erasure: firstly, as black people under the oppressive system of apartheid, and then, secondly, as prisoners; as black prisoners, in fact. A case could even be made for yet a third form of erasure enacted upon their lives in the present day: as unemployed and side-lined foot-soldiers of the Natal conflict, who are a potential embarrassment to the new ruling class.)

The confessional narrative adopted by the three (in poetic mode) counters any stark divide between the personal and the political, enabling a more fluid interface between the subjectivity of the individual and the commonality of the social than autobiography has conventionally been allowed. For, as Paul Gready argues, autobiography can profitably be viewed as:

the most democratic of genres as it does not depend on publication, is available to everyone and is wedded to no particular form and so can take its imprint directly from experience. In addition, it is a great cultural enabler: it can become the door through which the marginalised enter the house of a non-familiar tradition of literature or culture, often irreparably modifying it in combination with other cultural forms. (1994:165)

However, at the same time that the testimony of autobiography confirms the actuality of lived experience, it is also – in the case of the three men, specifically – an act of witness; a way not merely of confirming the authenticity of the events described, but pointing to these events as warning, as lesson to the broader community, both present and future. Thus, in one of the three forewords to the collection (written interestingly as “For Words”), produced by each of them, Bhek’themba Mbhele writes: “Now I tell what I has seen and heard since I arrested in October 1991 . . . I decided to include prison poems because of ensuring that the next coming generation must learn to read the reality which was happening to the past state prisons.” And Bheki Mkhize

writes in his foreword: “ ‘What we see’ is what we swear [?]. This book is our witness.”

4.5 Growing up in Dambuza township

Bheki Mkhize, Bhek'themba Mbhele and Sipho Mkhize were born and grew up in the small village of Dambuza, an impoverished, largely urbanised, freehold community that forms part of the Edendale complex in a valley west of Pietermaritzburg. Bheki was born in 1968. His brother Sipho was born in 1973, and their cousin, Bhek'themba, in 1970.

Bhek'themba's father and the mother of Sipho and Bheki were brother and sister. Bheki and Sipho come from a family of seven children: Mdu, Thandi, Bongani, Bheki, Muzi, Sipho and Ntombi. Their mother was a domestic worker in Pietermaritzburg. Their elder sister, Thandi, died when Sipho was in his first year of school and he was forced to leave to look after her two young children. He never returned to school, and only learned to read and write and to sign his name whilst in prison. Bheki completed standard five. After leaving school he worked as a petrol attendant in Northdale, an Indian area east of Pietermaritzburg. Bhek'themba completed standard nine. He enjoyed languages at school, particularly English. He remembers clearly an anthology of poetry which he studied at school, entitled *Modern Poetry*.

The early eighties, when Bhek'themba and Bheki left school, were characterised by an increasing militancy amongst the youth, with black schools being seen as a significant site of the struggle against apartheid. The Inkatha movement, “often representing the more conservative and older elements in communities, acted heavily and repressively against such school-based activism . . . through so-called vigilante groups that were set up in townships with the blessing of local councillors and the police” (Aitchison 1998:4).

Muzi Mkhize, the middle brother between Bheki and Sipho, was a member of Cosatu and of the Dambuza Youth Congress. At this point, Sipho, Bheki and Bhek'themba were involved in a civic advice office, assisting old-age pensioners and the disabled access their grants, but they were increasingly attracted to the resistance politics of the youth congress as pressure mounted on the community from the security forces and vigilantes. The trio of young men were first drawn into the defence committee which safeguarded the family and property of the imprisoned ANC leader of the Midlands, Harry Gwala, while he served a twenty-two year sentence on Robben Island for sabotage and recruiting young men into uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the military wing of the African National Congress.

Known as the "Lion of the Midlands", Gwala is hailed in several poems as the deliverer of his people; one who will lead them, in almost Messianic fashion, "... from untruth to truth / From darkness to light, from / Death to immortality" ("Lead me Lion!"). According to Trevor Cope, the epithet Lion – as in "Lion of our community", "Lion of our region" – is a common title of address for chiefs, and symbolizes the characteristics of supremacy and courage (1968). The epithet is combined here with an elevated style of diction in an heroic gesture that recalls the early nineteenth-century praise poems and other "prominent 'public' forms of panegyric to the leader" (Brown 1998:4).

The same elevated style of address and ritualized hailing of a shared past occurs in the poems "1912" and "The Best Memories". The former is a tribute to the founding of the then South African Native National Congress (later the African National Congress) in Bloemfontein in 1912, while "The Best Memories" harnesses the heroic status of great African leaders from the past to bolster both the individual (on the level of the imprisoned three writers) and the communal (the

oppressed black majority) response to adversity. In the poem “1912” the ANC is personified as a powerful and protective father:

He was birth to fight against
Racial elections; we still remember
And we won't forget the day our
Father was birth; we won't
Forget you, yes, we won't forget
1912, we will always celebrate you.

The “regenerative power of memory”, which Gunner (1999:53) describes as one of the key literary features of praise poetry, is employed in both poems as a device to build an “unpunctuated stream of time, from the past of the ancestors to the future generations who may invoke the subject through performance of the praises” (Lütge Coullie 1999:76). This is crucial in re-inserting the writers into a continuum of belonging and identity from which their incarceration has separated them, and of ensuring (if only symbolically) that they are not forgotten.

The writers were also involved at this point in what Bheki Mkhize has called a “block committee”: “Sometimes, you know, when we going to have a strike, so the leaders come, they tell us it's a block committee. We know what's going on. From four, five o'clock in the morning we take all the scrap cars. Put it in the road. No-one is going to work” (Interview 7, 2003:207).

By the late eighties in Pietermaritzburg the “fulcrum of youth militancy shifted from the confines of the schools to the terra incognita of the streets” (Johnson 1988:124). Increasingly the youth began employing ‘guerrilla-style’ tactics to defend themselves against attack: building roadblocks during boycotts and strikes and to aid ambushes, improvising home-made guns and petrol bombs and learning to communicate and convene meetings in secret. Soon, these ‘no-go’ areas defended by the youth turned into ‘self governing areas’ where people began exercising power by taking

control over their own lives.

Whole areas of civic life – the cleaning of the streets, crime prevention, the creation of recreational parks, the provision of first aid, even schooling – fell under the ambit of ‘people’s power’. I have commented already on the re-naming of streets and actual townships as a mark of resistance to the state and of alternative political power, but a particularly colourful and inventive sign of this usurpation of power from the apartheid state was the construction of ‘people’s parks’. Reclaiming waste sites in the ghettos, the youth planted grass and flower-beds, fashioning benches, fences and public ‘sculptures’ from scrap cars and township debris. Each park, of course, was given a name which was prominently displayed. ‘Mandela Park’ was the most popular, but others bore more inviting names such as ‘Kissing Park’.

Amongst the four poems (two in English and two in isiZulu) handed to me surreptitiously by Sipho Mkhize in 1997 was the poem, “Remember that Days”, also featured in their joint collection:

Time and chance;
Remember that days of pain and joy
Days of tears and love. Remember
That days of happiness and harmony;
Days of me and you at the love park.
At the place of joyfully walking slowly
With hand in hand; remember that days.

Remember that tender touching
I still feel you feelings of warm hands
And your sweet lips; your sparkling eyes;
You body movement.

According to Bheki Mkhize, the “love park” was a derelict area in Dambuza that had been reclaimed as a ‘people’s park’ by the local youth. Apparently, the park was very popular amongst comrades and their girl-friends. It is telling to note the emphasis again on the trope of memory as

a mechanism of survival for the authors and as a way for them to re-live 'happier days'.

The banal, sentimental formulation of lines such as "hand in hand" and "your sweet lips; your sparkling eyes" runs counter to the "Western lyric tradition of inventive image-making" (Brown 1998:250), with its emphasis on originality and innovation, and the concomitant aesthetic expectation of 'good' poetry. But the plain phraseology of the authors, their use of standard descriptions, only underscores the importance of recognising at the heart of much confessional prison literature the irrefutable testimony of an ordinary humanizing experience such as reading a letter or remembering a loved one, an experience that, to quote Dennis Brutus in *Letters to Martha*, is "a way of establishing one is real / personal / intimate and civilized" (Brutus 1973:80).

4.6 The Seven Days War

On 2 February 1990 president F.W. de Klerk announced the unbanning of a range of political organisations (including the ANC and the South African Communist Party) and the imminent release of Nelson Mandela. On 25 February a crowd of over a hundred thousand welcomed the newly released leader to Durban. His speech was conciliatory towards Inkatha and Chief Buthelezi and urged a cessation of violence between their organisations. Exactly a month later, at the same venue, Chief Buthelezi addressed his followers at a rally financed by the security police. In an interview Bheki Mkhize relates how busloads of Inkatha supporters, returning from the meeting, started shooting indiscriminately at pedestrians in Edendale Road:

The message was heard from them [the Inkatha supporters]: they need to plant mealies all over the Edendale place. You know, when the leader is telling the people he wants to plant all the mealies, so they must go and demolish everything, they want everything to be flat there. So these people were coming back from their meeting. They started shooting. (Interview 7, 2003:207)

In their poem “Seven Days War!”, the three poets recall the loss of friends and comrades in the fighting:

I remember that days; the days of war,
The days of missing and loosing our friends
The days of loosing comrades; the days of
Our attack . . .

From the perspective of their cell in the New Prison the men travel back to the past, to the week of 25-31 March 1990, and to the “wicked” events that cause them to wonder “what went wrong with humanity”. Suspended in a kind of ever-recurring present, where every day is almost the same as the next, blocked out from the possibilities of the future, they have only the past to reassure them of their humanity. The repetition of the phrase, “remember that days” or “I remember”, runs through the poems in this collection as a stubborn refusal of separation from the events of their lives (whether good or bad) and acts as a determined insistence on their involvement still in their own lives.

During the violence there were numerous eyewitness accounts of police supplying ammunition and weapons to the attackers, and of the Inkatha forces receiving logistical support and transportation from the security forces. The *amaqabane*, led in the main by committee members of the youth organisations, were crudely armed by contrast: stones, sticks, pangas, petrol bombs and home-made weapons formed their arsenal. Bheki recounts how he was in charge of a workshop manufacturing ‘zapper guns’ out of hollow metal chair legs. The poem, “We have Hit them where is Hurt!”, is an account of their resistance, and at the same time functions as a celebration of group solidarity and heroism in the face of extreme and almost daily adversity:

Since we formed our three [sic] brave
Committees; defence committees
Disciplinary committee, street committee
And block committee, we have a

Great victories, our enemies all over
The region were afraid to attack
Dambuza.

At the same time that the *amaqabane* of Dambuza were defending their area against the Inkatha attackers, however, they were also involved in a vicious struggle with the gangsters and *comtsotsis* who used the distraction of the war to plunder homes and rape women and young girls. It was a common tactic, for example, for these thugs to wait until a certain area was under attack and then – whilst the defenders were engaged in repulsing the enemy, and the community had fled to a designated ‘safe’ hall or church, usually being summonsed by a code of alarm whistles – they would ransack the abandoned houses.

We were fighting two different wars. Okay. What do I mean by that? At the Seven Days War we were fighting Inkatha people. In our area we were also fighting with amaQola. We call them amaQola. Gangsterism. Those people who worry the community . . . They take money. They start raping . . . All those things. And the elder people they come to us. “We know you. You grow up in front of us. Please. We don’t want to go to the police, because they don’t care. The police, we can tell them, they don’t solve our problem. You need to solve the problem. Stop what they [the gangsters] are doing. They harassing the people.” So it was like that. From the Seven Days War we fight Inkatha, on this side we fight gangsterism. We cleaning the area. We defending the area. . . . We fighting this side. We defending against some people who are coming to attack us. They know that we are fighting each other. It was tough. It was very tough. (Interview 7, 2003:211)

In February 1991 Sipho Mkhize was guarding the premises of Georgetown High School against the ‘Californians’ – a local gang who were harassing the female students from the school. He was armed with a home-made gun. At an appointed time he was relieved from his duty by another comrade. He handed over his weapon to the other person. Somehow, no-one is certain, a shot went off and Mkhize was wounded in the ankle. The principal of the school rushed him to Edendale Hospital. Although the bullet passed straight through his foot and he was rushed immediately to hospital, his left leg was nevertheless amputated above the knee. Mkhize maintains

that the doctors were “from the other side”, and this is why they amputated his leg. He was on crutches afterwards, and only received his artificial leg in 1995, about four years after being in prison.

In the poem, “For the Sake of Struggle!”, Mkhize describes the double war fought by the comrades: the violence of the Seven Days War, when “Dambuza Road becomes the / Boiling mud”, and the war against the gangsters – known as Operation Clean-up. Mkhize addresses the poem to a former girl-friend, the “girl of Bhungane”, a volunteer in the Catholic Church. He argues that the loss of his leg and his later arrest and imprisonment were his “contribution” to the struggle. Significantly, this is one of the few poems in the collection where the authorship is made clear; in general, the poems are not attributed to any of the three writers. Having said this, though, it must be pointed out that authorship is not actually claimed by Mkhize (nowhere on the poem does his name appear), but rather implied by the reference to the loss of his leg. Although there is no self-pity or regret in the poem, there is nevertheless a profound sense of loss. Mkhize concludes both stanzas with a figurative interplay between absence and presence, between sight and darkness: “Now I’m here too far from you, for the sake of struggle” and “I don’t see you, my love, I’m in / The dark place, for the sake of struggle, darling”.

In this poem, and in the personal and self-scrutinising, “Please God!”, Mkhize battles to make sense of all the suffering he experienced in his life. In an echo of Western confessional poetry, the latter poem is a moving testimony, probing for the first time in the collection, the inner, private motivations of the author. In an interview conducted after his release, Mkhize expressed the sentiment that he had been abandoned by God. His constant and feverish appeals to God in his poem – as if in earnest prayer or confession – seem only to have been ignored: “When I was

growing [up] I lose school, I lose my leg, I went to prison. All that thing was bad to me. I say, ja, God now doesn't look at me as a person" (Interview 3, 2002:174).

4.7 Murder and revenge: the death of Muzi Mkhize and the Ngcobo brothers

Early in May 1991, Muzi Mkhize, brother of Sipho and Bheki Mkhize, was murdered. The motive for the murder, according to court evidence, is a confused tangle of personal and political grievances. Muzi was involved in a secret affair with a woman called Fikile Ngcobo, who was actually already engaged to a well-known Inkatha vigilante, Sipho Mngadi. Mngadi was at the same time close friends with Fikile Ngcobo's three brothers, themselves also Inkatha supporters: Shezi, Sibongiseni and Mgu Ngcobo. Apparently, Sipho Mngadi found out about Fikile's affair with Muzi. He forced her to write a love letter to Muzi, luring him to a certain spot in Northdale where he was ambushed and stabbed to death.

The poem "My Good Friend" pays tribute to the writer's dead relative and comrade. However, the hailing of the subject as hero – as in the traditional form of the *izibongo* – is not simply a statement of historical autobiography or the description of a recorded event. In naming the individual, according to Lütge Coullie, the *izibongo* symbolise him or her both during life and after (1999:76). The act of symbolising in this poem enters the subject (Muzi Mkhize) into "the history of Dambuza's heroes" and into the "historic book" being written by the authors, alongside the names of other struggle heroes. In so doing, the poem – as Lütge Coullie says of the *izibongo* – becomes the "truthful account of an individual, but its truthfulness is secured by the community, not the subject" (70).

The three Ngcobo brothers were tried before a 'people's court' on 27 May. (Sipho Mngadi had

fled the area, and could not be found.) The ‘court’ was chaired by Sipho Mkhize. According to him, the ‘meeting’ lasted from early in the morning until late that night. Evidence was produced (Muzi’s bloodstained shirt, for example) and witnesses were also called. The Ngcobo brothers were found guilty of assisting in the murder of Muzi Mkhize and sentenced to death. The sentence was carried out immediately afterwards. Bheki Mkhize, Bhek’themba Mbhele and five other comrades (who later turned state witnesses) were involved in the executions. Sipho Mkhize, who was on crutches at that point, did not take part. The bodies were apparently so horribly mutilated that it was later difficult for the state witnesses to identify them. The house where the three Ngcobo brothers were living was also firebombed. Another man, Qiniso Dlamini, who was staying with the Ngcobo brothers at the time was also attacked and severely injured, although he managed to escape.

In his foreword to the collection, Mbhele writes that “to write this poetry [book] helps us to remove our guilt and nightmare”. The trauma of living with so much violence – Mbhele describes how “violence was here next to us” (Interview 5, 2002:198) – and with their own complicity in the bloodshed is seen by him in terms of a curse or the Christian concept of evil. Further on in his foreword, in fact, Mbhele claims that the writing of their book has been a form of ‘exorcism’. The sense expressed indirectly here of having been taken over by a force from outside, which compels one to commit certain ‘evil’ deeds, could be read as a strategy to avoid accepting responsibility for his actions. This is an extremely complex and sensitive subject. The question of how we as human beings deal with our own guilt (in whatever form, from the domestic to the national level) is demanding. To stand in judgment, therefore, of the manner in which one human being deals with his guilt is inappropriate, even unjust. For these three authors *do* acknowledge their individual guilt and responsibility. In the poem, “Have Mercy on us!”, they paraphrase the conventions of the

Christian confession:

Oh! God, in your goodness, in your tenderness
Wash away our fault, wash away our sins
Wash away our guilt, purify us from sin
Have mercy on us . . .
For we are well aware of our fault
We have our sin constantly in mind.

The liturgical influence (even direct borrowing) is intentional. There is a dominant Christian frame of reference that underpins the entire collection. The writers begin the collection with an invocation of the “Our Father” as a form of opening prayer or blessing on the poems that follow. Their language of repentance, confession and purification owes much to the Catholic tradition, within which Sipho Mkhize, particularly, grew up.

However, the ethical observations noted here in relation to Mbhele’s claim to “remove our guilt and nightmare” through writing are limited and ultimately inadequate without the crucial perspective of the confessional as catharsis. In this regard, Mbhele’s use of the term “exorcism” points beyond the strictly ethical to an overlap, in fact, with the Aristotelian purging of “pity and fear” through Classical tragedy. Of course, this release of powerful, painful emotions from author and audience (the community) is a critical element in all prison writing – and, arguably, literature in general – and underlines the transformation of intense experience into art. In an interview conducted in 2003, Mbhele elaborates:

I can say poetry is a good medicine to the author. A good medicine to the author, I want to emphasise that . . . As you read your poem now I thought – Oh, my God! – I knew that he wrote this poem for a certain cause. Not just because I’m an author let me write. For a certain cause. There is a cause behind the poem or the lines of the poem. There is a cause that will force you to do something. That is a reason. A tangible reason. A different tangible reason to write a poem . . . And the overall of that reason is pain. The overall of that different reason of the author is the pain. (Interview 6, 2003:200)

This theme of purification is taken up again at the end of the poem, “Have Mercy on us!”, re-directing the focus this time away from the abstract and ahistorical toward the specific circumstances of the three men’s lives during the violence of the early 1990s in Pietermaritzburg:

Open our mouth to speak out our peace through
The people of Soviet (Dambuza)
Show you peace graciously to Dambuza people
Wash Dambuza Road and Nomponjwana Road clean.
Have mercy on us.

Dambuza Road is the main road in and out of Dambuza township and therefore severely contested between opposing groupings during the Seven Days War. Nomponjwana Road, on the other hand, was the site of an intense battle between the *amaqabane* and the ‘Californians’, and also the street in which Bheki and Sipho lived. Speaking on this poem and the metaphor of “washing the streets”, Bheki Mkhize drew attention to the ritual need for purification. At the same time he also emphasised that the three writers had a responsibility to their community and to the historical events in which they found themselves:

You know, when we say we want to wash the streets, there’s too much bloodshed in our streets. Too much blood was shed. And, you know, when we speak truly like human beings, we didn’t like what was happening, but the situation was force us to be like that. So now we feel like it wasn’t supposed to be. But this time around we have to clean the streets. Wash out streets. To remove those dirty stains. ’Cause it wasn’t supposed to be. We want our children to grow up to not feel that, not see that. (Interview 7, 2003:210)

In August 1991, Sipho Mkhize, Bheki Mkhize and Bhek’themba Mbhele were taken into custody. They were held in the New Prison in Pietermaritzburg.

CHAPTER FIVE

“No gentlemen in the prison”: narrating the inside

When a person enters prison, Kate Millett writes, life stops; the life of the seasons, the natural world, privacy, open spaces, human contact, choice. “Then it goes on again”, she continues, “without meaning; creating meaning, imbuing meaningless time with meaning, is the terrible challenge of confinement” (1994:195). In Millett’s account the moment of imprisonment is depicted as a kind of death, a marker of irrevocable separation between the prisoner’s prior conception of self (the ‘outside’) and their new identity as one convicted. This is a particularly pertinent description of what Breytenbach has referred to as being “buried to what you know as normal life outside” (1984:108). The closed, uninterrupted boundaries of prison experience – a total entity – lead Lewin to his analysis of prison as “a complete world, a life complete in itself, without reference to anything outside itself” (2002:36).

For almost a year-and-a-half the three writers sat in the New Prison, awaiting trial. Eventually, at the beginning of 1993 they embarked on a hunger strike, demanding to be given a date for the beginning of their trial. At more or less the same time, they smuggled out of prison the first in what would become over the years a series of letters to the media (later also poetry) in which they detailed the “various forms of disfigurement and defilement” (Goffmann 1968:32) that characterised life inside South African prisons.

In her autobiographical account, *No Child’s Play* (1988), Caesarina Kona Makhoere writes: “If you want to see prisoners turned into hardened criminals, go to South African prisons . . . Prison

makes visible the evil root of the apartheid system” (38). Although by 1991 the signs were already there that the days of official apartheid were numbered (political prisoners had been released, political parties unbanned and the first of the Codesa talks had been held between the ruling National party and representatives of the liberation struggle), conditions inside the prisons were largely unaltered in respect of racism, corruption, violence and inhumanity.

Bheki Mkhize writes of their hunger strike and the consequences of their first letter smuggled to the ‘outside’:

They call us. The head of the prison. He ask us . . . Did you write this? I say yes. Then, why [he asks]. I say, I’m sleeping here in prison. I’m talking about something here that’s happening inside. People wants to know about it. He say, who told you people wants to know about it? I say, I know people wants to know because even I too while outside, I didn’t want to know about the prison, but this time around I think people needs to know. At that time we were on a hunger strike, we want to go on trial, because we were still awaiting trial . . . [The head of the prison] ask us, why you on a hunger strike. We say we want to go for trial. He said, okay guys, before we talk [about their illegal letter] I’ll tell those people to set a date. I said, hey, you can do that! He said, ja, I can do that. Right! We go to court. (Interview 7, 2003:209)

It was a small victory. Official power in South African prisons, while all-pervasive, is never omnipotent. There is a constant give and take, a see-sawing of the balance of power, as inmates struggle for greater recognition of their rights and the authorities seek to pre-empt and diffuse more threatening forms of resistance. Ultimately, of course, as Michael Dingake acknowledges, “the odds are always against prisoners in any contest with the authorities . . . Where they are determined to have a showdown, there is very little the prisoners can do” (1987:171).

The trial of the three men started at the beginning of March 1993. In the poems “Sorry Soviet!” and “By Four Hundred Rands” the writers detail their account of the trial that took place in

Pietermaritzburg's Supreme Court. Autobiographical truth, Paul Eakins maintains, is "not a fixed truth but rather an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation" (in Jacobs 1991:125). The 'truth' then of these poems and others in the collection that adopt a similar mode of witness or confession lies less in the accuracy (or not) of their description of what actually happened, and more in the unfolding of self-awareness and the shoring-up of identity that the combination of language and invention gives rise to.

Thus, in "Sorry Soviet!", where the authors apologise to the community of Dambuza (known as the Soviet Union) for leaving them alone and not being with them during the first democratic election in 1994, the writers build at the same time their self-sacrificing role in the defence of their community and their heroic identity as activists. At a dramatic (traumatic) moment of their lives – on trial for murder, facing lengthy prison sentences, betrayed by their fellow comrades – the three writers construct a reassuring and redeeming image of themselves: "The students of politics who stood [to] attention / In the High Court of Maritzburg". In the face of adversity – the criminalisation of their identities – the activists reply with what Paul Gready has described as "an autobiographical agenda linked to a collective and political identity and mission" (1993:515).

The poem "By Four Hundred Rands" describes how their nine co-accused in the murder of the Ngcobo brothers received a paltry fine of four hundred rands each in return for becoming state witnesses. There are several keenly-observed moments in the poem: the bailiff of the court and his dark sun-glasses, the way their nine co-accused walked across Longmarket Street smiling, how the mother of Sipho and Bheki "cried loudly". The words of the judge, though, have a particular gravity and pain: "Three accused, I keep you into the dark hole, until I find you guilty, now I rimand your case." I would argue that the seemingly simple and insignificant substitution of the

phrase “dark hole” for prison or custody – when seen within the strong emotional context of the rest of the poem, and the clear dichotomy set up between truth and falsehood, freedom and incarceration – reveals a self-conscious transformation of actuality that restores power to the disempowered writer and a voice of imagination to those denied it. As Paul Gready argues: “Prisoners write to restore a sense of self and the world, to reclaim the ‘truth’ from the apartheid lie, to seek empowerment in an oppositional ‘power of writing’ by writing against the official text of imprisonment” (1993:489).

5.1 Sentenced to fifteen, thirteen and ten years

On 31 March 1993, Bheki Mkhize, his brother, Sipho, and their cousin, Bhek’themba Mbhele were each found guilty on three counts of murder, one count of attempted murder and one count of arson. In total Bheki was sentenced to fifty-five years, Bhek’themba to forty-five years and Sipho to thirty. The sentences all ran concurrently, though. Excluding the extra month added on to their sentence for the letter they sent to *The Natal Witness* just before their trial, Bheki received an effective fifteen years’ imprisonment, Bhek’themba thirteen and Sipho ten. Sipho himself poignantly summarises the experience of prolonged imprisonment:

But maybe you notice one thing – most of the poetry, when we are writing, we are writing in prison, we are crying, different ways, you know. Sometimes I pretend a day I remember my girlfriend, but inside the prison I can’t see even one thing make me laugh. (Interview 4, 2002:189)

Writing, therefore, was an essential means of self-survival for the three men in prison. Exorcism, healing, a way of being remembered, building encouragement and strength to face adversity, throughout the years of their imprisonment, and across a range of written forms – whether it be poetry, letters of protest to the media about prison conditions, letters encouraging their political leaders such as Reggie Hadebe or denouncing the murder of others like Reverend Viktor

Africander (Hadebe himself later) or their private autobiography *Amasosha Ngaphandle Kwezi Kali* [sic] – the act of writing was, what Lewin terms, their “only real life-line with normality” (2002:65).

Mbhele writes in his foreword to the collection that “the coming generations must learn to read the reality which was happening to the past state prisons”. Clearly, then, despite whatever restorative value the poems might have certainly had for the poets themselves (Bheki Mkhize describes them as their “daily bread, day after day, night after night”) they were not solely orientated inwards, but also outwards, towards an audience beyond the high walls of the prison. On the one hand this audience was narrowly defined in political and racial terms, and consisted of their former comrades outside, as well as the broader oppressed black community. In these terms Sole writes:

Literature and drama were used as a means of political and social communication and conscientization, an attempt at ‘dynamic communal discussion’ by artists determined to inform all sections of black society of their position as blacks in South Africa, to give them encouragement and to awaken, unify and mobilize them under the rubric of their black identity. (1987:256)

Hence the poem, “Free Speech”, for example, builds the social role of the poet as propagandist through a list of the deaths of local political leaders (Reggy Hadebe, S’khumbuzo Ngwenya, Msizi Dube, Jabu Ndlovu, and Copper Masuku), politically-motivated massacres by the security forces (the Bisho massacre and Trust Feeds) and notorious apartheid laws (the Bantu Education Act, the Group Areas Act and the Population Registration Act). The naming of each item in the poem (each murder, massacre or piece of legislation) is accompanied by the dismissive derogatory remark in isiZulu, “Siss bayasinyanyisa”, loosely translated as spitting something distasteful out of one’s mouth.

5.2 Preparing for the future

The social role selected by these writers, however, is not restricted to the building of solidarity with their communities and the political conscientization of black society. The poems speak as much to the future as they do to the past and present. In this regard, the functional role of the poet as historian and teacher becomes a real locus of power that draws together a complex range of influences and traditions. The instructive practice of the oral praise poet is then combined with the restorative power of memory, popularly activated by prison writers against the double menace of forgetting and being forgotten, and harnessed to the moral responsibility of the writer toward the healing and advancement of his or her community. In *Black Mamba Rising* (1986), the ‘worker poets’ Alfred Qabula, Mi Hlatshwayo and Nise Malanga comment on their involvement in building a cultural movement: “We are involved in this, however hard it is for us after work, because we believe that our struggle is not only there to destroy the oppressive powers that control us. It is there also to build a new world” (Sitas 1986:5).

The pre-occupation of the three prison poets with the future – with the emergence of the non-racial and post-apartheid nation – is concretely demonstrated by their struggle whilst in Waterval Prison to separate themselves from the influence and the threat of prison gangs and to claim for themselves a physical space (literally, a separate cell) where prisoners could focus on developing and preparing themselves for their return to society:

We need a place for people who doesn’t involve themselves to the gangsters. We need a place for Christians. You know, to enjoy their rights to be Christians. We need place for guerrillas, for soldiers, for people who was involved to the struggle before, who is in prison, political prisoners. To continue with workshop that, guys, the struggle outside is finished. We supposed to go there. We supposed to change. It’s not easy to change when I’m here. I’m supposed to start inside first to change. (Interview 5, 2002:194)

The prison authorities responded with scepticism towards these attempts by prisoners to rehabilitate themselves in preparation for facing the challenges of re-entering a changed and changing society. As Sipho Mkhize comments: "But most of the prison authorities they have lost hope. They say, you want to create happiness in prison. There's no gentlemen in prison. You can't do that. I'm working here for such a long time, more than thirty years, you can't create gentlemen here. It's their life, they're eating blood. They're pigs" (Interview 5, 2002: p195).

Despite the cynicism of the prison authorities, though, as Mkhize claims in the same interview, "in ten people, two people don't lose their belief that they're going to start life again" (195). And so in Waterval Prison (where, according to the writers, gangs were the most active) the brothers launched a thirty-day hunger strike to demand separate and safe facilities. Forty prisoners participated in the strike, although only a handful persisted to the end. The authorities finally relented and gave them their own cell where up to sixty prisoners could be housed together away from the gangsters.

The writers used this opportunity to initiate a range of informal educational classes known as "Each One, Teach One". These classes focused on political tolerance (between the IFP and the ANC) and on inter-racial understanding and acceptance. Despite being in prison, the men were keenly aware of historical changes affecting the country, and of the national project of reconciliation and unity championed by Nelson Mandela, and embodied in Archbishop Tutu's symbol of the 'rainbow nation'. The men also conducted their own cultural classes, on poetry and speech and drama. "We want to create poetry, actors, politicians, you know. People who understand what's happening outside" (Interview 5, 2002:196). The transition from a culture of resistance to a culture of reconstruction is significant here. The political and social project of the future then is changed into

a postponed ideal where the personal (the idea of one's own individual release) and the national (the reconstruction of the nation as 'one nation with many cultures') coalesce, and the goal of personal freedom (from the bars of the prison) and the ultimate freedom of the nation (from poverty and exploitation) are one and the same. In the title poem to the collection, "We Waiting in the Dark", the metaphor of family draws together the personal and the national:

Mother of nation kindly give us a light
Give us a light like the love star;
We sturving for love of our mother
We sturving for love of our family and
Sturving for love of nation
We waiting in the dark.

5.3 "Waiting for non racial elections"

But the construction and projection of a liberated future by these three men had to be negotiated through the cruel exigencies of incarceration and punishment. Thus, the ideal nation of unity for which they (and many others like them) struggled and sacrificed was thwarted by their exclusion from participation in the first democratic elections of April 1994. Bheki Mkhize comments on the pain of this endmost banning: "You know, while I was in prison, the voting things came. We fight for the vote. We fight for everything. We fight for the struggle. But we went to prison. The most painful thing happened to us, we couldn't vote on that '94 election" (Interview 7, 2003:208).

Their expected elation and anticipation of triumph are rendered ambiguous by the bitter experience of being denied that for which they had sacrificed so much and waited so long. "We give ourselves to the struggle," Bheki Mkhize continued. "The mother of my children she's still crying today. She say [to him while he was in prison], you patriotic. You love your country, even you forget about us. You know, you forget about to look after us. You fight for your country. This time, they are free, but you are still fighting for freedom" (Interview 7, 2003:211).

There are three poems in the collection which deal with their exclusion from the elections: "Is it a Free Election?", "A New Flag of France" and "Don't Delay us!". In "Is it a free election?" the writers depict a society on the brink of its transition from minority rule to democracy: "All the races are waiting / For non racial elections, free and / Fere election, all the forces are / Waiting for free election / Even the black prisoners". There is an eager sense of expectation that is built up in these lines through the simple repetition of the words "election" and "waiting".

The optimism in this poem (however guarded) contrasts powerfully with the frustration and disillusionment of "Don't Delay us!". The latter is self-conscious of its status as a poem, particularly a poem of anger and protest, and the writers foreground this in their appeal to "Mr so and so" (whose anonymity and title mark him as a sign of authority) to cease equivocating and allow prisoners to vote:

Don't delay us, we tired now
We tired of leaning a propaganda
Lessons, writing about nonsense,
Guns, and death of our Africans
Now we tired of prisons, now
We tired of writting these angry
Poems, we must leave . . .

The phrase "we tired" becomes a chorus around which the writers gather a momentum of outrage, expressed as resentment at having continually to write "these angry poems". There is an indirect, unspoken wish embedded here, a yearning for a life where they would not have to write about "nonsense, guns, and death". The poem ends, "now we want our / Hopes; we want elections for / All races." Significantly, the phrase "now we want our hopes" reads both as a demand for that thing for which they have long waited and struggled (expressed here as universal franchise), and as an insistence on the return or resuscitation of those forces (taken from them) which kept them

motivated and energised during the struggle.

“A New Flag of France” concentrates its focus on the protests by prisoners around the country in 1993, demanding to be treated equally with all South Africans and allowed to vote in the country’s first democratic elections: “On February ‘93, prisoners decided to / Stand up, talk for our rights to vote”. The writers use the French Revolution of 1789 as an extended metaphor that parallels the deaths of twenty-one prisoners in Queenstown Prison, who are described as having died “fighting for their rights to vote”, with the revolt by French citizens against “the state prison of France that was called the Bastill”. The idea of the national flag – a conventional sign of national unity, identity and patriotism – becomes then a marker of transformation that equates France’s social struggle for a “new tricolour flag” with that of South Africa, and the adoption of the “people’s colours”.

Although as maximum prisoners the three writers themselves did not vote in 1994, they nevertheless regarded it as a victory that their national protests at least secured the vote for those prisoners convicted of minor offences or sentenced to less than five years. Significantly, during the 2004 election, the Constitutional Court upheld prisoners’ electoral rights.

5.4 Violence in prison

The subject of violence in the prisons is extensively covered in the collection. At least seven poems are structured in one way or another around this topic: “New Prison”, “Deaths in Prison”, “We are the Prisoners of Reasons!”, “Amazing Journey”, “A New Flag of France”, “Free Speech” and “For the Sake of Struggle!”. Not all the poems approach the subject from the same point of view. Some examine violence in the light of protests by prisoners for a range of rights or privileges, such as the

right to vote, as discussed above. Others – like “Amazing Journey” – focus on the arbitrary violence by prison warders as a show of power and superiority: “Prisoners were treated like donkey / Like wild animals; not even like a domestic / Animals” and “They were not ruling them with the / Law of humanism; there was no rule / Of truth justice”.

In this poem, where the writer records his experiences in Waterval Prison as the most “amazing journey in my life”, his incredulity and shock (despite being what he terms a “seasoned” prisoner) are registered in terms of the familiar literary trope of the journey of initiation. In this instance, writing down one’s harrowing experiences becomes significantly more than the conventional diary act of pegging down events as actuality, but rather, as Holst Petersen points out, an attempt by the writer “at rendering the unimaginable manageable for themselves and imaginable for the reader” (1991:iv).

But far and away the most notable source of prison violence was the system of gangs that, to a lesser or greater extent (depending on the nature of the prison), still affects prison life in South Africa. The most notorious of these gangs, of course, are the Twenty-Sixes – whose “domain is blood and money” (Reed 1994:143) – and the Twenty-Eights, who deal in prostitution and sex. The poem “New Prison” – identified as written by Sipho Mkhize and published in *Fidelities III*, 1997 – is a powerful witness to the events of November 20, 1993, when three prisoners died as a result of fighting between rival gangs in Pietermaritzburg’s New Prison.

The New Prison of Apartheid
from where the blood flowed like
water flowing in the river, even
the Orange River itself won’t be big enough
to accommodate all the bloodshed
of the New Prison.
The year 1993 was the year of dancing

on our blood.
 November 20, I won't forget you,
 we were dancing on our blood, yes,
 I still remember that day
 the day of November 20.
 The blood of our fellow prisoners was running
 from the fourth floor to the first floor.
 We heard the sound of home-made instruments,
 instruments of gangsterism.
 A New Prison of Apartheid
 down the valley of Maritzburg
 at the cemeteries of the Boers.
 I believe that it was in revenge for King Dingane.
 I believe that they remind me of the killing
 of Steve Bantu Biko.
 And I warn you that this country is not for revenge,
 slavery and bloodshed.
 God gave us a life
 but the New Prison takes it away.

The murder of their “fellow prisoners” at the hands of gangsters recalls in the poet’s mind the death in detention of Steve Biko in 1977. Mkhize also links the prisoners’ deaths to the murder of Piet Retief and his party at the order of the Zulu king Dingane in 1838, and argues that the underlying racial prejudice embedded deeply in the historical consciousness of the authorities (here depicted as the monolithic “New Prison of Apartheid”) is, in part, motivated by revenge for that slaughter more than a century ago. The death of the three prisoners is thereby removed from the incidental and placed squarely within the historical trajectory of racial domination and conflict that has characterized South Africa for more than four hundred years.

The monolithic New Prison, that creates a flood of blood larger than the Orange River, is depicted as rivaling the power of God: “God gave us a life / but the New Prison takes it away”. However, with his eye fixed on the future of the country, the poet cautions against “revenge, slavery and bloodshed”. The poem is thus turned subtly from being an indictment of a specific incident in prison

to the broader social circumstance of violent conflict in South Africa during its dramatic transition to democracy.

Whilst in prison the three writers campaigned vigorously, by means of their poetry, illegal letters to the media, strikes and demonstrations, against violence and gangsterism. Between 1993 and 1996 they recorded over twenty-eight fatal stabbings of fellow prisoners in the New Prison and Waterval Prison. These brutal activities were written up in their prison diary, *Amasosha Ngaphanle Kwezi Kali* [sic]. Their poems also chart their struggle for the extension of the franchise to prisoners, and the hopes and fears they had for the future society that they believed they would one day re-enter.

In the struggle against forgetting and being forgotten the writers fix in words the integrity of their past identities and counter the brutal threat by incarceration to their present selves. Their written words, whether in poem, diary format or letter, are almost always a means of communication and commitment. Their words demonstrate a range of functions from autobiography to instruction and social history, reaching beyond the walls of the prison to the outside community and to the future.

The oppositional power of writing that is built up poem by poem in their collection against the enforced determinants of the prison – their loss of personal autonomy – marks the beginnings of an alternative conception of themselves, one that is restored and healed. Through the power of imagination and description the writers also return a resistant power to themselves over the strictures of time and the boundaries of enclosed space.

CHAPTER SIX

Alterity and the resistance of voice

The social organisation within prison works to fix and protect the power of the institution. The daily practices of conformity, uniformity and repetition entrench the predominance of the institution at the same time as they erode the personal autonomy of the inmates.

In this chapter the ‘totality’ of the prison – its absolute reach into and over the time, space and identity of the inmate – is juxtaposed against the imaginative voices of expression and constructive alterity outlined in the writings of the three poets. Critical attention will be paid here to the range of assumed identities adopted by the writers and the plurality of aesthetic forms they fashion in order to safeguard their own inviolate territory of self.

6.1 Space and suffering

Goffmann’s classification of prison as a “total institution” (1968) points in the direction of an enclosed reference system; one that is not only a “complete world, a life complete in itself, without reference to anything outside itself” (Lewin 2002:36), but has also been sanctioned by the State with almost total power over its inmates, a power that in certain countries even extends to the point of their ritualized death.

By severely limiting the prisoner’s personal autonomy, conscribing the space of their physical and psychological world and regulating their time, the institution of the prison substitutes its own intractable social organisation for the individual personality and self of those it seeks to discipline

and punish. Herman Charles Bosman depicts this pervasive power of the prison as “a vast fat black serpent, trailing through all the corridors of the prison . . . filling the whole space between walls and roof . . . and this gigantic snake was alive and breathing, and it couldn’t draw breath properly because it was so closely confined between walls and roof. The prison itself was a live thing, sweating and suffocating in its own immurement” (1969:176).

Bheki Mkhize’s poem “Burning” (not part of *We Waiting in the Dark*, but posted privately to me in 1999 and later published in *Fidelities VI*, 2000, and in the collection *Glass Jars among Trees*) repeats, albeit in a more muted manner, some sense of the claustrophobia and suffocation of Bosman in the lines:

It burns, always burns
So few words spoken
So little needs to be said.
The air is hot and heavy.

The rank closeness within his cell that Mkhize describes here contrasts with the restorative effect of expansive space in another poem, “Distance Love”, which he sent me in 2000 and was published in *Fidelities X*, 2004:

Distance, I hope you never far
From where I am.
Distance, I have that feeling
When I come out you will be the
Song that will heal my wounds.

In this poem, the writer’s longing for open space coheres with his longing for his girl-friend. The distance of the latter from him and the expansiveness of physical space are related to each other by their mutual absence from his life. Physical distance then is personified as his beloved, while she herself is abstracted into the notion of space. Both elements (space and the woman) are identified

as possessing lyrical qualities (“the song”) that will heal his “wounds” when he is eventually released. The remote day of release is another form of “distance” that disappears into the future in the same way that open space disappears into the distance.

6.2 The power of space

At the moment of sentencing the individual surrenders the control and ownership of his or her space and time to the institution of the prison. The *where* and the *when* of their individual lives are no longer voluntary or unique, but now rather decided for and acted upon. Time ceases to be a resource for them, and instead becomes their controller. It has to be served rather than used:

They [the prisoners] have been given time as a punishment. But they have been given someone else’s time. Their own time has been abstracted by the courts like a monetary fine and in its place they have been given prison time. (Cohen and Taylor 1972:89)

Space too contracts upon the prisoner, turning stale and immobile, described by Mkhize in “Burning” as “hot and heavy”, and by what Breytenbach refers to as “closeness in fetid cells” (1984:315). But in any institution of regulated communal life such as prison, the intersection of time with space is fundamental to the exercise of power. The powerful control of space and time ensures that inmates maintain order, discipline themselves and follow orders. The unbroken intensity of this power over the prisoner is analysed by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, in a passage that is worth quoting at length:

In several respects the prison must be an exhaustive disciplinary apparatus: it must assume responsibility for all aspects of the individual, his physical training, his aptitude to work, his everyday conduct, his moral attitude, his state of mind; the prison, much more than the school, the workshop or the army, which always involved a certain specialization, is ‘omni-disciplinary’. Moreover, the prison has neither exterior nor gap; it cannot be interrupted, except when its task is totally completed; its action on the individual must be uninterrupted: an unceasing discipline. Lastly, it gives almost total power over the prisoners; it has its internal mechanisms of repression and punishment: a despotic discipline. It carries to their

greatest intensity all the procedures to be found in the other disciplinary mechanisms. (1979:235-236)

“Exhaustive”, “uninterrupted”, “unceasing”: the power of the prison institution is almost absolute. Not for nothing does Foucault refer to it as “a *despotic* [my emphasis] discipline”. Like the dictator who rules with absolute and tyrannical power, prisons, according to Michael Dingake, “denature, dehumanise, depersonalize, decivilize and de-everything their victims” (1987:121).

In Chapters Four and Five, however, we saw clearly how the autobiographical voice of the three men wrote back against their isolation, loneliness and physical abuse to alleviate their pain and return power to themselves. We saw how the act of writing restored the integrity of the author’s self by an active reawakening of the communal function of poetry (teaching, testimony, solidarity); what Chapman in “The Critic in a State of Emergency” calls “forms of participatory witness” (1991:3). Thus, while the social organisation within prison structures compliance and submission on the one hand, the imagination of the writers challenges and resists on the other.

Paul Ricoeur describes how the power of the poetic imagination, in and through language, liberates the reader into a free space of possibility (in Kearney 1998:142). I would add, though, that the effect of the poetic imagination is not merely restricted to the act of reading, but also involves the art of writing too; offering “an opening onto possible worlds which transcend the limits of our actual world” (Nuttall and Michael 2000:17). I am not advocating an ahistorical and universal value to these writers’ work, but simply pointing up the power of the written word as an instrument of oppositional expression and redress, and as a vital means of self-empowerment.

6.3 The communal voice of the poet

The poetic voice of self-empowerment manifests itself in their prison writing across a broad spectrum of enunciations and practices. Different, sometimes even conflicting, identities are articulated in their poems, and these assumed personae shift the attention from a solitary, inward-looking notion of writing towards the idea of a collective, oppositional space of restoration and engagement. This will be discussed in greater depth later in this chapter. In order to do so, however, it is important first to examine some of the concrete practices that their writing served in the “exhaustive disciplinary” context of the prison.

I have already discussed their letters of protest to the media about conditions in prison, as well as their political and cultural classes, which often took the form of agit-prop theatre, highlighting the problem of Aids or gangsterism. Their writing, though, had still further concrete dimensions. Bhek'themba Mbhele (who, it must be remembered, possessed a grade eleven) was the scribe or secretary for the inmate community. The “prisoners’ secretary”, as Sipho Mkhize described him, had to be able to write in a variety of styles (personal letter, poem, official letter to the authorities) and also for all manner of occasions (appeals for mercy, translation, job application). Drawing upon his own experience as a scribe, Breytenbach describes this function as follows:

I was the writer, but I was also the scribe . . . People came and asked for love-letters; for poems – particularly for poems – or they wanted me to write requests to the boere for this or for that; or to help them apply for jobs outside when the time for release became imminent . . . So I was continuously inventing their lives too, Mr Investigator . . . I wrote requests for parole, for release, for transfer, for interviews. You name it . . . I wrote the personal histories of chaps that they had to submit to their social workers. A prisoner would come and say: Well, you know, just write that I’m OK, you know what to put in, I’m sure you know better. In fact, they were quite convinced that whatever life I could invent for them would be far better than the one they had. (1984:144-147)

Paul Gready argues that being a scribe, inventing other people’s lives or projecting oneself into

their shoes, was in itself another “source of empowerment” (1993:510). By manipulating certain formal conventions of language such as point of view, imagery, and tone, the scribe takes on (in a figurative sense) the identity of someone not himself and presents his or her thoughts and feelings as dramatic characterization that transcend the limits of the actual world.

The specific skills required for this difficult process of imaginative empathy are described by Sipho

Mkhize in an interview where he comments on Bhek'themba's function as secretary:

Bhek'themba was acting as prisoners' secretary . . . Some of people cough out, they say, hey, I lost my girlfriend, would you write a letter including poem, you know, I want to encourage her. We think with Bhek'themba, we try to write special poem, we trying to hear his [the other prisoner's] story . . . Most of all, he was patient. You know, if you say I want you to wrote a letter to my girlfriend, it's not easy to take a ballpen and write something for someone. Sometimes we help him: no, let's put that words, she'll understand you know, like that. (Interview 4, 2002:187)

The three writers also had a collection of various textual resources in their cell, which they drew upon when writing their various letters of love, comfort, support or apology. This “small library”, as Bhek'themba Mbhele referred to it (Interview 4, 2002:188), consisted of press cuttings, popular quotations copied or torn out of books, old letters they had received, magazines (such as *The Reader's Digest*, given to them by Morna Macleod), as well as copies of their own poems. The poem, “Mother of Mercy”, for instance (despite its obvious religious title), is built almost entirely out of a series of popular clichés or catchphrases that often appear in the form of bumper stickers or popular lyrics:

When I'm wrong, no body forget, but
When I'm right, no body remember,
No body know the trouble I've seen.
When my days are dark, friends are few,
Good girls goes to heaven, but bad girls goes
To any where.

Although clichéd, the phrases resonate with the authentic sense of a person misunderstood and victimized, a sentiment no doubt common amongst prison inmates, and therefore a popular choice in their correspondence to family, loved ones and prison officials.

The three poets also had a very limited selection of books which had been smuggled in to them or stolen from other prisoners, and carefully hidden from the prison authorities. There were two books, in particular, which they remembered owning, and which had a significant impact upon their lives and their writing. Both books were written by Pietermaritzburg authors whom the men knew well from their involvement in the resistance politics of Natal in the 1980s. The first one was *baptism of fire* by Dikobe wa Mogale (1984), published shortly after he was sentenced to ten years imprisonment for furthering the aims of the ANC and carrying out guerrilla operations for MK.

The second book, *Ayofezekha Amaphupho* (1994), was a collection of short stories and poems written by the youth of Imbali township in Pietermaritzburg during a creative writing course in 1993. The course was organised by the Imbali Rehabilitation Centre and the Culture and Working Life Project. The book, loosely translated as “Dreams will Come True”, was of particular relevance to the three poets because, as the co-ordinator Nise Malange wrote in the preface, it was a popular record “by the youth of their experiences of violence. It even goes beyond that as it tries to heal the wounds of brutal encounters with violence, both visible and invisible. It preaches the word of everlasting peace as Imbali has been one of the most affected areas in Natal” (1994:8).

In an absolute ‘despotic’ environment such as prison, the concrete communal function of the poetic voice restores a sense of moral responsibility and dignity to the criminalized self. The social role of the writer in narrating and affirming the collective as well as, rather than in opposition to, the

isolated and vulnerable self is thereby further emphasised.

6.4 Poetry as a collective practice

We have already examined the ways in which the three writers set up a collective space of solidarity in their work which operates both to define and to safeguard a psychological territory of ownership and power distinct from the influence of the prison institution. This social emphasis is mirrored in the collaborative technique of writing practiced by the poets in prison.

The collaborative method of writing was adopted by them largely in response to their cramped physical surroundings, without solitude or privacy. But this non-individualised creative discipline also builds a form of moral support and the practice of co-operation against the difficulty of writing in English (not their mother tongue) and the challenges posed by the mix of oral-African and Western poetic conventions in which they chose to write.

Paul Gready argues that the workshop method empowers the participants by stressing collaboration and sharing above the idea of single, solitary creativity:

The collaborative workshop method is a political act which is a movement towards an essentially democratic production process and communal vision. It empowers the participants both creatively and politically Importantly, the workshop method shows that each person has a story to tell, that you do not need to be well-educated or specially gifted to tell a story or to write. (1994:179)

In practice the workshop technique involves a challenge to the Western convention of authorship, which (very crudely) elevates the isolated, innovative efforts of the individual above a community of production. (Of course, there are several exceptions to this generalisation: the collaboration between Pound and Eliot, for instance.) The three poets approached the subject of creativity and

inspiration in an open and flexible manner, drawing upon their combined skills and knowledge rather than expecting one person to invent the whole. Here is an extract from an interview in which Bheki Mkhize explains (to me) how, practically, they composed their material in a collaborative manner:

JM: Is it one person who writes one poem or is it three people working together on one poem?

BM: Some of the poems. And other poems are different, you see. 'Cause now sometimes we have to sit down and discuss things, things we see. Right. We discuss the things. Sometimes Bhek'themba tell me how he feels . . . that and that and that. I come with my views. Sipho comes with his views. Sometimes you say, this I feel, I can say it. I got more to say, but I can't say it now, you'll see on my paper. Right. And I write . . . You see like a meeting, you know. When you got something in your mind, like you say, okay, I got these lines, go write it down, then we come and sit together, see how it works. Each and every one when he finished to write a poem he have to produce it in front of us. We sit together. Let's see this poem. Okay. Sometimes there's a mistake there. Maybe I'll correct them. Maybe they'll correct me. That's how we work. (Interview 7, 2003:205- 206)

Mkhize's emphasis on consultation, discussion and peer critique – to regard the composition of poetry as very much “like a meeting” – confronts the conception of poems as “harmonious totalities, autonomous natural organisms, complete in themselves and bearing a rich immanent meaning” (Culler 1975:115). In fact, there is a complex tension between anonymous, non-personalised poems in the combined collection, *We Waiting in the Dark*, and those pieces (sometimes lifted directly from the collection) which are fixed, authenticated as the work of a particular author and submitted to me for publication under that person's name.

Clearly then, the non-subjective world depicted in *We Waiting in the Dark* is altered and complicated by the process of publication that transforms a poem into a commodity, into the original property of an individual. This tension between the individual published self and the anonymous collective voice, intriguingly, is not collapsed into one or other of the terms, but rather

held in balance as a kind of productive dialectic that necessitates a wholly new and different conception of identity.

6.5 The multiplicity of personae

The poems in *We Waiting in the Dark*, as we have seen, are not static reflections of an individual's inner motivations. Their concerns (generally) are not the poet's internal psychical processes, deriving from a specific point of view, secured in the "autonomous and coherent point of self-reference" (Lütge Coullie 1999:70) of an individual author. Instead – viewed within the explicit context of prison, and the assault on the individual's conception of self that this "despotic discipline" exercises – their poems emphasise the necessity of the communal as resistance and alternative empowerment.

The issue of identity, then, is crucial to the various ways in which the poems articulate an imaginative space in prison for opposition and difference. But as we have already noted, the accent for the three men is upon writing as a collective space rather than for the self alone. In these terms then, identity is secured more in community and less in the subjective inwardness of the self. There are a number of poems in *We Waiting in the Dark* that embody and expand upon this 'communality' in a particularly striking manner. These poems have at their centre a range of multiple, even conflicting identities, that shift and change continually as the point of view or voice of the poem itself alters.

Hence, in the poem "I'm an African Fighter Man!", the writers (who were never members of Umkhonto we Sizwe) adopt the persona of an MK cadre, and dramatize the rhetoric of the military oath that he or she takes as they are sworn into the 'force':

I serve in the forces; which guard my country
And our way of life, I'm prepare to give my life in their defence,
I will never surrender of my own free will;
If in command, I will never surrender my men,
While they still have the means to resist,
If I'm capture, I'll continue to resist by all means to
Available; I will make every effort to escape;
I'll accept neither parol no special favour from the enemy,

I'll give no information, no take party in any action
Which might be harmful to my comrades, cause I'm an African
Fighter man, and I'll always be.

I have been unable to ascertain whether this poem is based upon an actual MK oath or to assess the degree of poetic invention or borrowing in it. Clearly, however, the central speaker of the poem, the exaggerated "I", is consciously abstracted into a non-personalized voice of heroism and defiance. The inflated, uncompromising tone of the voice sweeps aside any particularity of characterization that would distract from or dilute its dissenting ambition.

The large, dramatic gestures of "I'm an African Fighter Man!" contrast with the subjective specificity of "Poor People". The imaginative register of the poetic voice in this latter poem shifts in focus to the concrete details of socio-economic deprivation:

Tell me what is it like to be poor?
Do you ever drink tea?
Every morning my mother boils tea, in the large pot for
The whole people, or house; tea is very sweet when you put
Sugar in it; when you don't it is very bitter, it is lik poor.
Who is your father?
He is a carpenter, carpenter is a man who always puts a pen
On his ears.

I live in the home of ugly houses,
Home of low income people, the people who lives
There cannot healthy cause their house don't have
Window, I call it 'over congestion'.

There is a complex interplay of authorial positions in the poem. In the first and second lines the author addresses an imagined reader with the rhetorical question: "Tell me what is it like to be poor? / Do you ever drink tea?" The questions are directed from the dispassionate, slightly naive standpoint of someone interested in finding out what poverty is like. We might even conclude that they themselves are not poor – or why would they ask the question in the first place? Significantly then the authorial perspective in the poem alters, and we are presented, via the concrete image of drinking bitter tea, with the textured experience of what it is actually like to be poor.

What occurs here is more than just the main speaker answering his own questions by imagining the experience of poverty. Instead, the entire centre of the poem is shifted, moving unobtrusively from a separated and objective voice interrogating the subject, to the very particularity of the subject itself. Again, this is not just a clever stylistic device for manipulating the sympathies of the reader. I would argue, rather, that such shifts in poetic voice or persona are fundamental to the multivocal, communal orbit of the three writers' complete body of material. Moreover, unlike the fixed, unitary and authoritarian voice of the prison institution, these poems propose multiple identities, shifting perspectives and plurality. In this sense, then, the poems are distinctly similar in structure to traditional praise poems which, according to Gunner, are themselves "the site of dialogue and conflict, as they contain multiple voices and multiple memories" (1999:56).

"Girl on the Run" embodies a similar complexity of voices within itself, but intensifies the effect by extending the number of contending voices from two (in "Poor People") to three. The poem narrates the woeful story of a young girl whose schooling is disrupted by the insistent sexual advances of the school principal. When she decides to stay at home instead and "teach [her]self how to sow or do something with life" her father accuses her of laziness, and sends her off to work

on the tea plantation of “that cruel settler, Mr Bother”, who beats her. (The play on his name is quite telling. Although it could simply be a spelling error, Botha is a common enough Afrikaans surname to be familiar to the writers.)

The poem begins in the first person, employing the perspective of the young girl who speaks directly to the reader in an autobiographical, even confessional voice of authenticity: “I’m tired of running / All my life I’ve been running . . . I was once a dutiful daughter; a nice Cristian home.” In the second stanza, however, the authorial voice switches suddenly to the persona of the headmaster issuing instructions to the young girl: “You remain behind you, take wood to my house; you take / This chalk and books to my office”. Significantly, his words are not bracketed out from the first-person narrative of the rest of the poem through inverted commas or through the usual speech conventions of “he said”. Instead, the narration and the dialogue run straight into each other without separation or demarcation. The poem returns then to the perspective of the young girl trying to convince her father to allow her to stay at home. She fails, and at the end of the poem the voice of the narrator changes again, this time to the harsh tone of “Mr Bother”, the plantation owner, as he justifies his brutal treatment of her: “I’m whipping you for / Taking time of eat without my permission.”

These shifting, contending voices, however, do not only occur within individual poems, but also operate between them. Thus, the poem “Rich People” is an arrogant retort to the earlier, companion poem “Poor People”. The similarity in their titles speaks for itself. “Rich People” employs the tone and style of address of the dramatic monologue to satirize the prejudices of the emerging black middle and upper classes: the narrator’s father is a popular and respected lawyer, while her mother owns a pre-school:

Poor people are no civilised
Do you want to be a bad girl?
How many times told you not to talk to those boys?
I have slapped you on many occasions for talking to them
Through the fence; you are a stubborn goat;
Let me see your face, you are shame of it already!
Why should you go out to play with those boys?
They are bad boys from poor homes,
You must be a good girl.

By adopting variously the voices of a sexually abused young girl, a school principal or a white farm manager the poets shift perspective continually both within and between individual poems.

The self represented in these poems is always mediated through a range of poetic conventions and influences (such as the dramatic monologue) in order to undo, upset and challenge the balance of power in these texts. In this manner, I would argue, the three writers also claim back from the prison institution the right of choice, the freedom of ordering and the exercise of control over at least one (albeit imaginative) area of their lives.

6.6 Intertextuality and the ownership of identity

There is a further feature of this reworking of the beleaguered self through contending identities and voices that still requires close attention. We have already noted the writers' broad application of clichéd statements, popular catchphrases and liturgical elements in their material. But the writers also make extended use of the lyrics of popular songs as well as extracts from the so-called 'high' tradition of English literature.

Bheki Mkhize's poem "Hello Mum, I'm in Jail" collapses into one line the distinct titles of two totally separate songs ("Fast Car" and "Talkin' 'bout a Revolution") by the American singer Tracy Chapman, from her 1988 self-titled album: "But I'll take it to the limit / And *talk about revolution*

and *a fast car*" [my emphasis]. Mkhize's other poem, "Do not Cry" (not included in the collection, *We Waiting in the Dark*), also comprises several lines taken directly from Bob Marley's song "No Woman, no Cry":

Hush my little darling do not cry
Do not shed no tears . . .
In this great future, you've got to fight
The best you can to find a better place
For you.
We used to mingle with all kind of
People. Bad friends have and good
Friends we have lost long the way . . .

The phrase "good friends we have lost long the way" can be read as a poignant reference to the political conflict in the townships around Pietermaritzburg in which the writer was involved (notably during the Seven Days War), and the death of "good friends" and comrades .

But it is the writer's frequent borrowing of sections (in some cases almost the entire poem) from so-called canonical English poets, that I find particularly striking. Amongst the other material already examined from their "small library" the three writers also had an anthology of poems (prescribed for schools), which they had stolen from the prison's own library. It is this text that was the source of their appropriation of William Wordsworth and W.B. Yeats, in particular.

In a stirring address of encouragement to his "dear comrades" and solidarity with their suffering, Bhek'themba Mbhele, in his poem "My Comrades" draws directly from Yeats' poem, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree":

My dear comrades! My dear comrades,
I know more than another;
I know what makes you sad, what makes you angry;
Not even your parents can know it as I know,
Who makes you angry, never mind comrades

*I shall have some peace there, for peace dropping
Slow, dropping from the sky . . . [my emphasis]*

The fluid manner with which Yeats' lines are seamlessly incorporated into Mbhele's text – without quotation marks or other conventional form of referencing – suggest a natural, informal leveling of the formal categories of 'high' and 'popular' art and a blurring of the fixed lines of distinction drawn between them. At the same time, this practice of appropriation calls to mind the unconstrained borrowing that frequently occurs in *izibongo*, where performers quite naturally would select and use praises from pre-existing sources.

The poem "Shade of Prison", on the other hand, takes its title directly from Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality": "Shades of the prison-house begin to close". The first part of Section V of Wordsworth's ode (up to line 68) is repeated verbatim in "Shade of Prison", and only two original lines by the imprisoned writers are added on to the bottom: "Don't let those shades of the prison / House close up on you."

The voice of caution in these closing lines does more than repeat Wordsworth's own, but signals in fact an imaginative process whereby the three writers incarcerated in a prison in the Natal-Midlands towards the end of the twentieth century appropriate a nineteenth-century British text (the poem was first published in 1807) and make it their own. There is a further poem in the collection which is informed by the work of Wordsworth, and which operates similarly to "Shade of Prison". "Waisting our Power!" draws directly on the first nine lines of Wordsworth's sonnet "The world is too much with us" (again without any marks of referencing).

The procedure of appropriation over another distinct work of art is a further demonstration of the

power returned to the three authors through the structural process of aesthetic selection and ordering. Questions of authorial ownership and of originality in this process are more appropriately answered in the light of a community of voices that share and exchange the right of possession (as occurs within *izibongo*), rather than securing it to and within a particular self and a fixed identity. In a specific reading, too, the heavily 'derivative' and referential nature of some of the material in *We Waiting in the Dark* calls to mind T.S. Eliot's concept of an 'historical sense' in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1962), whereby individual works of art are regarded as part of a larger history and culture, owned by and belonging to all: "the conception of poetry as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written" (1962:297).

In his essay, "The Death of the Author" (1977), Roland Barthes proposes moreover that no text ever occurs in a vacuum or speaks its own original tongue, but instead is "woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages" (145). He goes on to argue that a text is in reality only "a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture" (146). Barthes terms this system of embedded references to other books, other sentences, intertextuality, describing it as an all-encompassing and certainly inescapable field or environment in which an author works and from which he or she draws.

This practice of eclectic borrowing across cultural forms and of a communality of authorial ownership is a profound challenge to the notion of a central authorial subject, responsible for a fixed, authentic and original text, and to the notion in fact of this text as a discrete commodity. Returning to the unitary and monolithic structure of the prison institution described earlier by Foucault – an institution that enforces the supremacy of a singular voice only – it is fruitful to use Bakhtin's model of epic, monological discourse (1981) in order to understand the way in which

prison cancels out all other contending utterances and replaces them with the totality of its own. At the same time, of course, Bakhtin's notion of the multivocal, of the dialogic, (what he calls "novelistic discourse") relates directly to the plurality of voices adopted by the three writers in their material as a means of resisting the monologic discourse of the prison and inserting their own imaginative voices in the space created.

In this, the enunciation of contending voices in *We Waiting in the Dark* – across a very wide range of cultural formations (from the 'high' to the 'low') – is an act of self-retrieval and self-empowerment. The expression of alterity then in their writing, of ways of thinking and being in opposition to the harsh orthodoxy of the prison, guarantees a space of integrity for their voices which their surrounds routinely resist. This "oppositional power of writing" (Gready 1993:489) is their only defence, the only means of redress for the three men in their cold and dark "cavity of shame".

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion: Toward a new national space of imagining

The social and cultural transformation of South Africa from the late eighties to the turn of the century has witnessed a rigorous questioning of “the over-determination of the political, the inflation of resistance, and the fixation on race, or more particularly, on racial supremacy and racial victimhood as a determinant of identity” (Nuttall and Michael 2000: 1-2). This challenge has opened up, at the same time, an analytical space for a newly-evolving national culture, one which celebrates a multiplicity of opportunistic and hybrid voices, and champions the inclusivity of those ‘popular’ voices previously marginalised.

7.1 The influence of cultural studies

There is no doubt that the opening up of the ‘canon’ of literature to a much larger selection of texts and inter-texts has, in a not inconsiderable way, been influenced by the inter-disciplinary ‘agenda’ of cultural studies, which began in England in the early 1950s and 1960s with an almost exclusive focus on the media and on popular working-class British culture, and has since expanded all over the world and across a virtually infinite range of new literatures and cultural forms. A large part of the original impetus behind these early programmes focused on the rejection of the idea of ‘high’ culture, assumed to have a constant value across time and space: Arnold’s notion of “the best that is known and thought” (Enright and de Chickera 1962: 262). This repudiation of universal aesthetics in favour of the *totality* of cultural forms within a given social context brought into the foreground the study of the popular and the ordinary.

In South Africa, particularly, cultural studies emerged largely “under the rubric of ‘inclusiveness’, reflecting an agenda to include that which has been marginalised” (Nuttall and Michael 2000:13). It is mainly against this theoretical framework of redress, of attempting to cross-examine and complicate the structures of dominance within a particular discourse (in this case, prison writing), that I have situated my study of the written material produced by Bhek’themba Mbhele, Siphon Mkhize and Bheki Mkhize and the other participants in the New Prison Poetry Project.

By combining a poetic and sociological analysis I have attempted, in the words of Duncan Brown, “to grant the poems their status as aesthetic forms in society . . . rather than to reduce [them] to functional utterances” (1998:219). Analysis of these texts reveals that they were intended by their authors to perform a variety of functions. At one end of the spectrum they acted as a release mechanism for individual pain and frustration, and as a bulwark against forgetting and being forgotten by the outside world. But they were also a vital form of solidarity, of maintaining their author’s commitment to the protection of their rights as human beings.

Whether it be through a letter to the media or a poem published in a small literary journal, their words enacted the catharsis of autobiography, the moral responsibility of communal instruction and the detailed, painful recording of social history:

So poems have a very important role in life because even if there is a misunderstanding between you and your girlfriend or your wife you used to write it and beg down on your knees and beg her, I’ve got your gift here, just read it, it’s a poem. Even at the funeral just to say goodbye to your friend. Please, can you give me a platform to recite this poem for my friend, to say goodbye, farewell. A poem is a very important thing. Even in prison, I’m trying to give you a little picture, that even in prison, to reveal all the situation that is happening in prison – that was because of a poem. (Interview 4, 2002:189-190)

At the same time, though, the words of these different writers spoke back to the monologic, totalizing discourse of the prison, articulating a range of alternate spaces, identities and forms of expression to those enforced by prison social engineering. Serious recognition of the writings of ordinary men and women in prison as a weapon of self-empowerment and redress was impelled, in part, by the interest that cultural studies took in the literatures of the politically powerless and the culturally voiceless. As Simon During explains: “Cultural studies has been most interested in how groups with least power practically develop their own readings of, and uses for, cultural products – in fun, in resistance or to articulate their own identity” (1999:11).

The syncretic and hybrid strategies of expression articulated by the writers in the New Prison Poetry Project were revealed in Chapter Six as employing a range of imaginative effects, all working towards the retrieval of spaces of discursive power. Foremost amongst these effects discussed were their use of the dramatic monologue; of floating, conflictual voices of authorial perspective; and, significantly, of trans-cultural appropriation or intertextuality.

During himself goes on to explain the significance of concepts like intertextuality, which “return us to renewed cultururation because they enable us to see how particular individuals and communities can actively create new meanings from signs and cultural products which come from afar” (1999:6). From popular songs through to Yeats and Wordsworth, trans-cultural intertextuality in the work of these prison writers profitably enables the formulation of non-ethnic and non-linguistic categories of cultural production.

7.2 Toward a new imagining

The debate over culture presented in this particular study is, of course, integral to the process of

national unity and imaginative self-transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. This interactive relationship between cultural and social transformation in a post-apartheid society is critical to an understanding of the challenge proposed in this research to broaden the criteria of aesthetic evaluation in contemporary South African literary criticism and to expand the general understanding of what literature is and the role it performs in a complex, changing society. In fact, as Jean Philippe Wade argues, “narrating the nation could be our attempt as literary persons to search for a methodology for identifying and researching those texts and inter-texts that have brought us to this place in time” (1996:8). Of course, one of the central aims of this study has precisely been to fulfil this proposition through a detailed textual and contextual scrutiny of the manuscript *We Waiting in the Dark*, as well as other literary material brought to my attention as a result of the 1998 poetry project in the New Prison of Pietermaritzburg.

What started out then as an enterprise of rehabilitation and reclamation, to present these writings to and situate them on the contemporary cultural map, has evolved into a complex meditation on the structure of power in a “total institution” (such as prison) and the resisting space of difference delineated in select examples of new prison writing. But, further, this study has also pointed up the need to challenge and deepen the range of literary and cultural forms taught in tertiary institutions (even schools) and hence to expand the perception of what literary knowledge is.

In the light of this study of Pietermaritzburg prison poetry, my call for a broadening of the concept literature certainly only repeats “one of Hofmeyr’s key arguments in 1979 for a history of South African literature that should include ‘the modes and discourses of all South Africa, be that discourse oral, be it in newspapers, archives, magazines and pamphlets, in a comprehension of the text as embodying social relationships’ ”(Chapman 2003:421).

Doubtless, since 1979 much has been done at tertiary institutions in this regard. The accepting of cultural and media studies into the curricula of these educational institutions (amongst other influential factors) has witnessed an enormous challenge to the dominance of the literary Western canon, and it is standard practice now to encounter J.K. Rowling, 'fairy tales' and advertising copy on the same syllabus alongside the English Romantics and the Modernists.

Furthermore, as South Africa shifts into postcoloniality, away from the "over-determination of the political . . . and the fixation on race . . . as a determinant of identity" (Nuttall and Michael 2000: 1-2), the teaching of literature too has shifted from a combative anti-apartheid and anti-colonial stance to one more clearly focused on 'creolization'; on the "cultural interaction and interpenetration that, despite apartheid, has historically taken place in this country" (Sole 1994:5).

It is appropriate therefore that we now begin to move beyond a crude materialist paradigm based upon a polarity of 'elitist' and 'mass' culture. I have argued in this study that the crude binaries Chapman drew between "texts of autonomy" and "texts of utility" are inadequate to describe accurately the complex hybridizations of contemporary South African life, and specifically the varied texts produced by the participants of the 1998 New Prison Poetry Project. Quite clearly, though, such a "democratisation of culture" (Sole 1994:2) demands at the same time a dramatic revisioning of accepted criteria of aesthetic evaluation.

Texts like the ones examined here call into question a complex of ideas around authorship, originality, identity, and even the ways in which meaning conventionally is read into the lines of a poem. In dealing with these particular issues, this present study has been no more than perfunctory; simply sketching in very broad strokes the nature of the challenge. In truth, though, I am only able

to point to this vast and complex field as productive material for further research, having clearly set out for myself (from the beginning) a totally different direction and wholly other project.

To conclude a study of this nature then is not to draw a line beneath the varied propositions raised here, but rather to open this very specific field of contemporary cultural studies out further to a more dynamic, inclusive and pluralistic aesthetic.

On a personal level, the study has been a tribute to the remarkable courage of the prison writers with whom I had the privilege of working (however briefly in some cases). Their commitment to the restorative power of the word (be it spoken or written) remains with me as a revelation and an inspiration. If this study can in even the slightest degree bring recognition both to their experiences and their cultural production, then it will for me truly have achieved its aim.

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Beautiful of the Nature

The man sitting
under the nature.
I'm taking the tree
as the thing that
provide by the nature
and nature give shadow
to a man.

He choose to sit under
this nature with the
aim of felt comfortable
when I look at this man
he thinking so deep about
something that he never
know where that thing
come from if I straight
looking to that man.

He look sad about
something that singing
about it. when I take
a look at the man there
is something that he
looking at and he concentrate
to that thing maybe it's big
mountain confront him he
serious singing about that
mountain or he singing
about something that
confusing many people.

If I guess the song
says where that thing
came from who create
that it's God at the same
time he found another
question where God came
from God created by nature
what about nature?
Ecxualy I don't know what
man singing about if he can
able to talk with me.

I wish to ask something

to him about what his
song talking about

by Sibusiso Majola (1998)

Inside the Cavity of Shame (Draft 1.)

The woman and a man
they sitting like people who have a
shortage of something. And inside their
cavity things are not in a good condition
If I take a good look
there is a table next to the man.

Oh What a cold cavity. A man wearing a jacket
inside his cavity which shows it's coldness;
And a woman sitting on a seat of shame;
next to her there is a jug and a mug
on the table; she sitting like
a person who needs help or a person who is
feeling cold; yes it is cold inside the
cavity of shame; and people
look unhappy and they look like people
who desire something or waiting for
somebody who can come and
help them to help
themselves, in order to
make their cavity comfortable.

Some peoples says God help those
who help themselves

by Sibusiso Majola (1998)

Inside the Cavity of Shame (Draft 2.)

The woman and a man
they sitting like people who
have a shortage of something
and inside their cavity things
it's not in a good condition

If I take a look to a man
there is a table top of the
man and there is another
one in front on that table
there is something that not
putting in order oh! a cold
cavity.

A man wearing a jaket inside
his cavity that shows it's cold
and a woman sitting on a seat
of shame next to her there is
a kettle and mug that must be
on the table and she sitting
like a person who need help
or person who feeling cold.

Yes! it is cold inside the
cavity of shame and that
peoples they look unhappy
and they look like people
like peoples who desire for
something or they waiting
for somebody who can
come and help them about
how can help themself
to make things happend
to make their cavity to
be comfortable. Some
peoples say God help those
who help themself

Sibusiso Majola (1998)

The Cavity of Shame

A woman and a man
are sitting like people who
have a shortage of something
and inside their cavity things
are not in a good condition.

If I take a look at the man
there is a table behind
the man and there is another
one in front. On that table
there is something that is not
put in order oh! a cold
cavity.

The man wears a jacket inside
his cavity, that shows it's cold
and the woman sits on a seat
of shame. Next to her there is
a kettle and mug that must be
on the table and she sits
like a person who needs help
or a person who feels cold.

Yes! It is cold inside the
cavity of shame and these
people they look unhappy
and they look like people
like people who desire for
something or they're waiting
for somebody who can
come and help them to
help themselves
to make things happen
to make their cavity to
be comfortable. Some
people say God helps those
who help themselves.

by Sibusiso Majola
Published *Fidelities VI*, 2000

Diversity in Despair

Fellow country-men, noble South Africans
Let me pour my apology to the nation
This is my apology, our apology to the land
And its people.
I was arrested, I apologise
I was accused, I apologise
I was prosecuted, I apologise
I was engaged in many crimes, I apologise
I was guilty for each and every crime, I apologise.

Please take my apology as a repenting figure
The verdict was harsh as a hot iron to swallow, Yes!
I apologise.
Let me pass my apology to the entire nation
Let me send my apology to the victims
Of the merciless crimes of this country.

Let me apologise for being a prisoner
Let me send my humble apology to the community
I admire
I'm apologising for taking your love for granted
Which you have shown to me for so many years
My aspirations start with an apology to you
All my roots were ungainly and poor, Yes!
I apologise.

I was ungodly, ungovernable, ungrateful
I was left unhallowed in hell
I stumbled, Yes! Putting my life to stultify for good
I have to explain with no excuses instead of apologies
I kneel to you all for what I did, Yes!
I apologise.

This is my own apology from the bottom
Of my heart
Through your love my world will never ever perish
Truly! Truly! I apologise from now and for good
I wish my apology will last for decades
Flowing to your hearts like a fountain stream
I apologise, Yes I do! Yes I do!

by Themba Vilakazi
Published *Fidelities VI*, 2000

Melody for Mboneni Wangu Muila

wasekaya
tell me
when those ngulube spies
in the bright lights
of embiza
in front of the ccv's of ejozi
three star okapis in their hands
vertel my gazi
my ma se kind
never did you think
of reciting for them a poem
net a bietjie van isicamtho
to resist those okapis
from penetrating your body
forcing to dance
kofifi style
a dance jy sal never nie forget
until the mulas come
to possess you

by Siphiwe Ngwenya from *We Jive Like This* (1996).

Melody for Mamase

when i look at you
you bring to me
sad memories
tears
tears i once shed for my mother
when she left me on this earth
and i had to fend for myself
while i was still crawling
to life
you have grown up now
you know why i hide my poems
against those men
with crunching boots
honky tonks
and dangling guns

by Siphiwe Ngwenya from *We Jive Like This* (1996).

Melody of Waiting

tired
of waiting
and just waiting
(for freedom to come
knock at our doors?)
now that our candles are on the ready
against rotten waiting
genocide
how long
this melody
that squeezes me like an orange
a tin shack
a waterpipe
a pavement
a dingy park
when there is plenty of land
tired
of waiting for this train
this melody
tired

by Sipiwe Ngwenya from *We Jive Like This* (1996).

A Seed Must Seem to Die

I, more cleverer than you

They say they gone to school
they know new things
lots of things

Me too, I gone to school
I gone to school when I's born
an' I learn new things
which I never see in my mother's womb

Yesterday
I see a man shoot another man
not look in his eyes to read question
Why my brother
as wife and children and extended family
and all of life pass quickly in dying man's eyes

He shove his hands in pockets of dying man
he pull out a dime
he pull out a shilling
he cuss on this fuckin' fool
why don't he carry more bread in his pants
Ah, ten dollars, good for a fifth of whisky
You no die for nothin' brother
I gonna think of you as I drink my fifth
pushing the dying man's weight off him
and the earth also
it pull the man down

My school is better
I see a man killed
to buy a fifth of whisky

I, more cleverer than you

They say they gone to school
they know everything
Me too I gone to school
I gone to school the day I's born
Yeah, I never see these things
in my mother's womb

Yesterday
I see a big man

very big
He take baby from mother's breast
He smash its head on the ground
He grab mother's nipple with his long teeth
and he bite and suck milk mixed with blood

Mother cry
Mother cry
But man with long teeth he suck and suck
while baby dying
mother crying

Man with long teeth
He rape mother with his teeth and his penis
Mother die
Baby die
But big man's stomach full of milk
and he laughing

Baby dead
no milk
milk for monster only

My school is better
I see baby killed for milk from mother's breasts
foul semen of monster planted
inside womb of beautiful woman
crying

I, more cleverer than you

They say they gone to university
They know knowledge of big books
I was in my school yesterday
I see them catch a man without papers
Those papers they call passes
Oh, those passes can kill a man

They say to the man
Those papers are your balls kaffir
Ever see a man leave his balls at home
Come kaffir
You going to jail
No, we will not take you to the judge
If we took you to the judge he'd kill you

Better we take you to Baas Potgieter's farm

O, some have died there, we know,
But u-h you may be lucky who knows
Come on kaffir, get into that fuckin' van
Baas Potgieter is a good man
If he thinks you're unhappy
He takes you out of your misery

My school is better
I see a man sentenced to die on Potgieter's farm
When they tell him his papers were so bad . . .

I, more cleverer than you

They say they graduated
They got Ph.D.
They know psychology and philosophy
They gon' teach me 'bout life

Oho, what they know
I tell you
Yesterday

I see a man raping his daughter
she say Father what 'you doing
He say Shut up I'm strong you weak
that's all I know
I take what I want

He throw her down and she cry
But he ravage and he ravage
and she cry tears
and she bleed much blood
But he ravage and ravage
till his heart was full of beastly joy

His daughter she die
but man jus' grin
full of the joy of the beast

My school is better
I see a man rape his daughter
then throw her on a rubbish pile
weeping and disgraced
and she die
on the rubbish pile

by Daniel Kunene from *Staffrider* April/May, 1981.

Door

i open the door and see no one
i always open the door
i think i will wait
someone may come some day
someone who wants to see me
someone who will listen to me
one must have patience
one must trust
one must have faith
i want someone to see me
i want someone to hear me talk
i want someone to knock on the door

by Wopko Jensma from *Sing for our Execution* (1973).

Do you Remember?

IT is a deep and sacred experience
To love
And be loved by you
THE vision of our first consummation
Immortalised by your purity
Still fills and sustains
The fibres of my being
AND yet again last night
I saw your face
In the palms of my hands
Burning with a fire
Foreign to my soul.

AND I wept
Not for the pain
Nor for the ecstasy
But for the Gift of Love
And the Unity of our spirits
On that fateful day,
When soft, sweet pain
Lulled you to sleep in my arms

Do you remember?

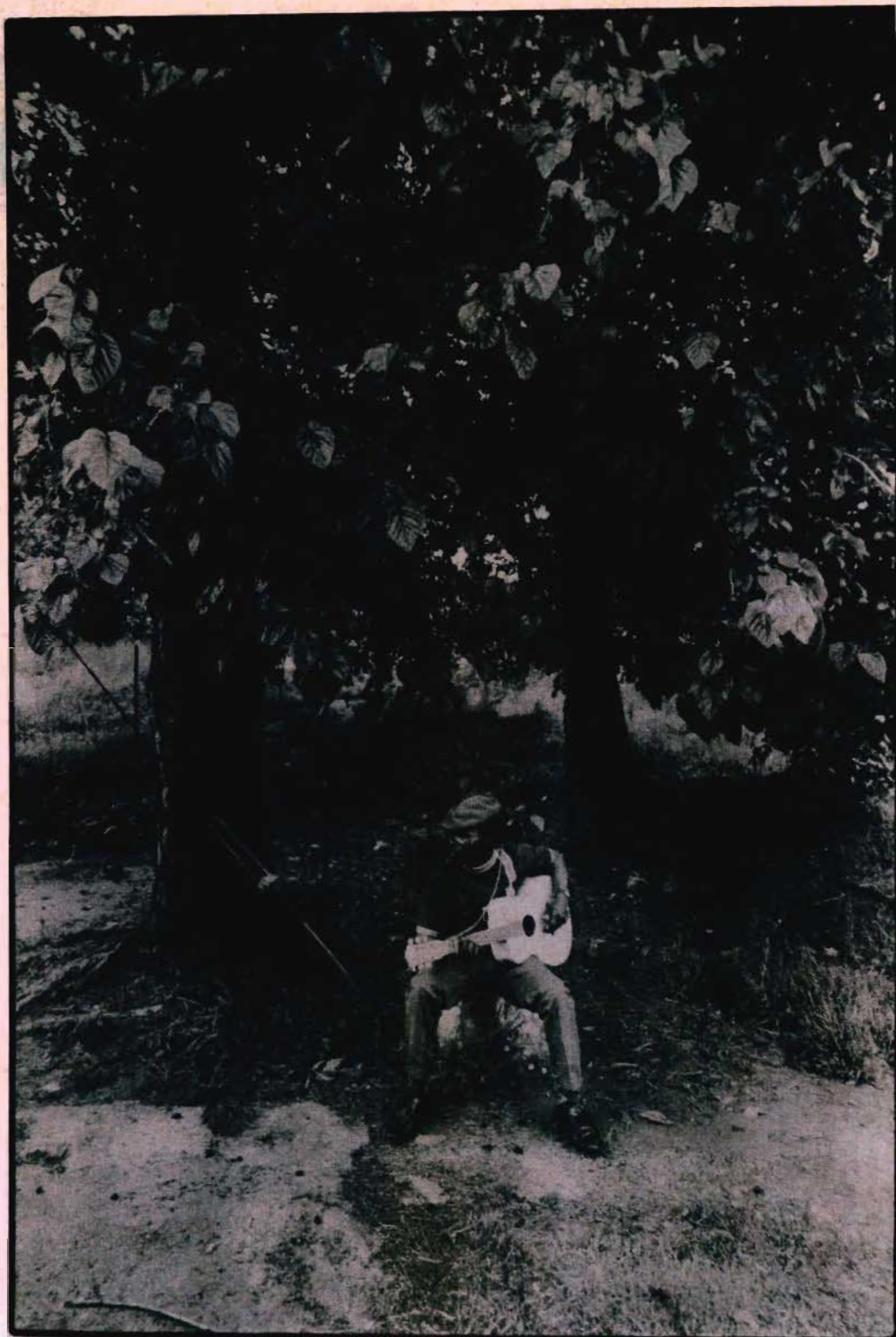
by Don Mattera from *Azanian Love Song* (1994).

One Calabash – One Gudu

those chaps you saw
blowing dagga pistols
beneath peach trees
are the africans
taking my memory
to the true african era
when people loved to share . . .
one calabash – one *gudu*
ah!
togetherness – sameness – african culture
o! hear me
you europeanised african minds
when saying its loathsome
when seeing the ghetto guys
africanising europeanism
opening a coke litre cap
drinking it mouth to mouth
without western separating glasses
ah!
say it you *ma-rookas*
one calabash – one *gudu*
togetherness – sameness – unity – tradition

hhayhhash!
one calabash – one *gudu*
hhayhhash –
the people shall share!

by Mlungisi Mkhize from *One Calabash – One Gudu* (1990).



Helen Aron



Makana and Ntsiki, Rockville, Soweto



In a Kitchen, Kullarney, Orlando West, Soweto

Where people live ...



Thomsville, Lenasia, February 1981. Tired of sharing a two-roomed house with fourteen other people, she built her own house in the back yard.



After six months in hospital following an accident, the old man returned to find that the Kliptown Shanty where he had been living had been 'removed'. The unsuccessful search for accommodation led him to this place, where he made his 'home'.

Sevontein Correctiona Service
Private Bag X9057
Pietermaritzburg
3200
24 November 1998

Dear Mr Moolman

Greeting you in the name of poets. We hoping that you are still in a good condition of life as much as we can.

Mr we decided to write for you after long time. We like to express our greatest thank the way you edited our poems and the warm welcome at Hexagon Theatre on 8 May 1998. We have leant a lot to the other poets including to the China poets. To being involve in this Fedillities makes us to more developed our work (poetry).

In this regard, our spesific request to you is this; please don't fogert us in each an every programme which involving poets. Because we are ready to prociding with the work of this nature even when we are out from prison. And we also wish to know that you can still admit our poems if we can reffered to you?

Thank you

From: Sipho and Bhek'themba Mkhize

Medium A New Male Prison
Private Bag X9022
PM Burg
3200

Dated [blank]

Dear Sir

I'm so glad to have this opportunity of writing this letter to you.

Sir, after having an contact with you I fee the great hope of success to the whole of my work. Infect I know that we are not together by that. But there's only one thing which I want to let you know.

Cold and fresh water you could find it beneath the soil – underground but fine soil you could find it over the desert.

Sir, kindly contact for me my grandmother, Miss Macleod to the following phone no 67955 (code 0331). If my request would be considered Miss Macleod will hand over you my poetry book which should be published to the editors.

These following poems are the example of my poetry book. These poetry book and also these four poems should be written collaborated with my brother whom are my two co-accused.

I hoping that my request would be considered and admired soon.

Yours faithfully
Sipho S. Mkhize

New Male Prison Medium A
P/Bag X9022
PM Burg
3200

5 August 1995

Dear Miss

According life we are still pushing well, and we hoping that you are in a good condition of life as we wish so. Every time we thinking about you we hope and praying that God can keep you safely untill we come out of this place.

Miss, how can we forget you and the things that you done from us; you make us to realize that we the human being and we still a society. So we like to thank you for your encouragement.

Miss, our letter is based under this issue, according an exercise book that you has been given us, we decided to turned it as a poetry book, in other words we wrote a poems through it. This is the only way of how to show the next coming generation and also our childrens. We hand it over to you by ensuring that all spelling are the correct or incorrect spelling. We request you to do that because we know you can afford to do that as you the teacher. So kindly be specific if there's something which you don't understand. Among these poems there's a certain three poems which is translated by Zulu.

Miss, we tried with our best to publish this book but we failed to meet the publishers or editors. Our aim about these poems is to be a poetry book, which will remaine to be a history. So kindly contact any publisher you know and kindly hand it over to them to be published as poetry book to any publisher you need.

So please Miss don't worry or upset about such a bug job that we reffered to you. You only one whom we believe and you the only one who we can relay our needs.

Miss, we've more to say my friend, but as from now lets conclude our letter. We are still looking forward to hearing from you.

It would be a great pleasure if our request considered and admired.

Thanking you
Yours faithfully
Bheki Ernest Mkhize
Sipho S'phiwe Mkhize and
Bhek'themba Sweetwell Mkhize

For Words (First poet)

Now I tell what I have seen and heard since I was arrested on 1991 October. I decided to make poetry. The poems about bad times matters of apartheid. My understanding is limited to the things of our country South Africa. In this poetry I decided to include prison poems because of ensuring that the next coming generations must learn to read the reality which was happening to the past state prisons.

I learnt a lot in prison. So in such the way that me and my colleagues we have a degree of patience. We did our best to come a term. To write this poetry helps us to remove our guilty and nightmare.

People of South Africa, freedom is now in sight, but through this poetry there's the poems dealing with apartheid, exploitation of blacks, oppression, racial nepotism and also our heroes poems. According to all these apartheid systems we manage to exorcise it by writing this poetry book called *We Waiting in the Dark*. We included prison conditions that's why we called it by this name.

I humbly beg you to be not confused when you meet poems which translated by Zulu language. Like the poem *wahleka mgungundlovu* and other two poems. By this poem *wahleka wahleka mgungundlovu* I tried to show you my pride of our city *Umgungundlovu* popularly known as *Maritzburg*. And to assist in ensuring that these poems reach all who are not yet fully literate. And to be proud of our vernacular language which is Zulu. But I undertake you that you will get more poetry translated by Zulu next time.

Now I like to thank the following persons due to their role on this poetry book.

I thank my poets *Bheki E Mkhize* and *Sipho S Mkhize* by their contributions of poems through this poetry. Thanks my brothers, I say continue forward about your ability, forward with Ubuntu (humanism) abundantly.

I like to thank my mother *Betty MaMkhize Mbhele*. My mother who gave me this daily bread of leaning and writing. Her tolerance while I was in prison. Thank you. My Aunt *Busi Mkhize*. I'll never forget my sister's daughter *Tholakele Janet Madlala*. I thank her to organize an exercise book of writing these poems while we in prison.

I congratulate to all people of South Africa especially to those who were participated to the role of ending apartheid, because I hate apartheid.

I appreciate to the first democratic state president *Nelson Mandela* and his Union of South Africa government of *National Unity*.

Name	<i>Bhek'hemba Sweetwell</i>
Surname	<i>Mbhele</i>
Age	25 years
Place	<i>Pietermaritzburg</i>

For Words (Second poet)

I greet you readers; now I take this opportunity to introduce myself as the one of the writers of this poetry.

My name is Sipho S'phiwe Mkhize. After my birth in 1973, later I decided to be the one of poems writers or poet. As I wrote this poetry which was collaborated with two poets. First one is my best friend who is my causon. I call him Siba Labalosi (Mbhele) by his nickname. As well as my brother who I call him Mqophi by his nickname. I thank to my colleagues.

I don't want to forget my sister Betty maMkhize Mbhele who is my eldest sister. I thank her and my mother Busisiwe. I thank her by her contribution of two flowers and to makes it grow. Two flowers which is decorated by the massage of love. Thank you my mother. I emphasize my thank to my two brother whom are too tolarated during the darkness days.

My belovely readers, I request you to makes your minds to be consentrated and absorbed like a sponge. This poetry have been catigorise into four categories. Firstly is sonety, secondly is lilick, thirdly is elegy, last one is epic. Through this poetry which is called *We Waiting in the Dark*, there is a certaine poem which called Xa, this poem is a true poem and its easily understand by the black people because its all about the magic of the certain blacks.

Readers please will you tell me that what type of poem is this among the four categories I mentioned to the above?

To thank again, I like to thank the certain prison authority Captain du Plessis. I thank his role he played to allowed prisoner to be the lawfully writers inside the prison.

And I thank the editor of this poetry.

Thank you for your mercy God bless you.

I thank to any one who puted his or her hand to this poetry.

For Words (Third poet)

Desire for all, I now introduce my self as the third poet of these poems. My name is Bheki Ernest mkhize from P.M. Burg. I say desires for all mankind in a world. The future of all elements we wanted to see its came a show of prison. Above all this we learned to forgive and love. We are one brothers, come hand in hand we shall overcome.

“What we see” is what we sweart. This book is our witness. My special thanks is to thank the following people whom played a major role in this book. I firstly thank to my two brothers, Bhek'themba and Sipho. I say guys you are two of a kind. Without you I should not tolarate this misereble place. We in the encouragement you have give to me. I wish you to do the same to athers. Thank you my comrades.

How can I forget Aunt Mrs Betty Mbhele and her fimaly for what you have done from us. We wish God and engels to gained from your dairly living. We as your childrens we used to pray that when the time has come we will repay by working for peace in the country. We wishing you a long live.

To a dearest mother, my beloved mum whose tender cere has taught me the meaning of love. You will always remine in my heart and this goes to my special fried whom has being with us for the such a long period of suffering and pain. She giving a warm loving care. Without her right warm arm we wouldn't have this opportunity to write this book. I say Miss MacLeod you the hero.

This are my words, I dedicate to all South Africans. Lets go for it.

I love a new beginnings, I suppose because I've always believe that its possible to wipe the slate clean and start again now. At the begining of the second year of this decade would it be wonderful if each and every one of us could put all the mistakes hurts resentments bihind us and make a truely fresh start.

What wonderful and sensetive difference this would make. So lets go for it now, for the sake of our childrens and better future for them. “Hey you” kids out there be wise, stay out of drugs, choose life not dead.

This is from me to you.

Thank you.

Bheki Ernest Mkhize

We Waiting in the Dark

Shout Africa, shout
It's been too long sinc we lay and waked;
Mother of nation kindly give us a light
Give us a light like the love star;
We sturving for love of our mother
We sturving for love of our family and
Sturving for love of nation
We waiting in the dark.

Oh! Sweet home, sweet home
Now we feel the smoke and
Fire, second becomes minite
Minite becomes an hour
An hour becomes week
Week becomes a month
Month becomes a year. I
Think all bars would be opened
Darkness would be death
Light would be birth now
I would thank to the politician
And to the whole Africans.

Shade of Prison

Our birth is but asleep; and forgetting;
The soul that rises with us; our lives ster hatch
Else-where; its setting and cometh from afar; not
In entire forgetfulness, and not in utter nakedness
But trolling clouds of glory do we come from God
Where is our home; heaven lies about us in our
Infancy!

Shade of prison has begin to close
Apon the growing boy;
Don't let those shades of the prison
House close up on you.

New Prison

The new prison of Apartheid;
From where the blood flowed like
A water flowing in the river; even
Orange River itself wont be big enough
To accommodate all the bloodshed of new
Prison. The year 1993 was the year of dancing
On our blood. November 20, I wont forget you,
We were dancing on our blood, yes, I still remember
That days, the days of November 27 [sic]; the blood of our
Fellow prisoners were running from first floor to fourth
Floor. We heard the sound of home made instrument,
 An instrument of gangstsarism. We heard a back
 Ground of authorities.

A new prison of Apartheid
Down to the valley of Maritzburg
At the cementries of
Boers. I believe that was the
Revange against King Dingane;
And I believe that they remind
Me back to the killing of
Steve Bantu Biko. I warne
You; this country is not for
Revange; slaves and bloodshed.
 God gave us a life, but
 New prison take it away.

New Prison

The New Prison of Apartheid
from where the blood flowed like
water flowing in the river, even
the Orange River itself won't be big enough
to accommodate all the bloodshed
of the New Prison.
The year 1993 was the year of dancing
on our blood.
November 20, I won't forget you,
we were dancing on our blood, yes,
I still remember that day
the day of November 20.
The blood of our fellow prisoners was running
from the fourth floor to the first floor.
We heard the sound of home-made instruments,
instruments of gangsterism.
A New Prison of Apartheid
down the valley of Maritzburg
at the cemeteries of the Boers.
I believe that it was in revenge for King Dingane.
I believe that they remind me of the killing
of Steve Bantu Biko.
And I warn you that this country is not for revenge,
slavery and bloodshed.
God gave us a life
but the New Prison takes it away.

by Sipho Mkhize
Published *Fidelities III*, 1997

Deaths in Prison

Those blood shed, on you Maritzburg New Prison;
It was started from your old prison;
Those bloodshed to our fellow brothers; it's not
Acceptable even to God, the creator.
Deaths, that have internationalise the notoriety
Deaths, that have internationalise the brutality of rule,
Not to ruling according law of humanism.

This bloodshed of our black brothers;
It destroyed our black house; when
The Africa return, the memories shall
Come back as a river flood our bedeville mind;
Oh! Lord; I tried to show my heavy cross by
Making this transparantly but no one take notice,
Oh! Lord these death are inviting the heavy storm,
The heavy storm of uncontrollable revange, yet to come.
Deaths in prison!

We are the Prisoners of Reasons!

We are the reasonable prisoners,
We are the products of apartheid; yes
We are the victims of oppression,
South Africa! South Africa belongs to all
Who live in it, we all love South Africa,
And we all need it to be democratic,
How can it be democratic when others still
Sleeping to the pavements? How can it be
Democratic when the prisoners are still in
Prison with the past offenders, by the same
Old story? How can it be democratic when the
Prisoners are still not allowed to vote.

We are the prisoners, we are the
Reasonable prisoners, you may call
Us a criminals, we are the prisoners
Of reasons. We will never
Accept to carry the sins of
Oppresors, we didn't oppressed the
Peoples of country, but we were
Under the oppression ourselves;
We are the prisoners of reasons.

Amazing Journey

I took an amazing journey; a journey to
Waterval prison; I'm seasoned ex-prisoners myself;
I didn't seem the violations of prisoners like
The violation of Waterval prisoners;
Prisoners were treated like donkey,
Like wild animals; not even like a domestic
Animals; that was amazing journey in my life.

I remember December 29, I still remember
The day of violators, the day of perpetrators
Of prisoners rather human rights abuse;
Yes. That was amazing journey in my life;
No one can advise me,
No one can answer my questions,
There was a weep of all prisoners;
They were not ruling them with the
Law of humanism; there was no rule
Of truth justice, I learned a lot,
That was amazing journey in my life.

Remember that Days

Time and chance;
Remember that days of pain and joy
Days of tears and love. Remember
That days of happiness and harmony;
Days of me and you at the love park;
At the place of joyfully walking slowly
With hand in hand, remember that days.

Remember that tender touching
I still feel you feelings of warm hands
And your sweet lips; your sparkling eyes;
You body movement.

Remember that magic moment
Girl remember you said you gonna
Take care about me, remember
The promises of me and you;
Remember that days.

Hello Mum, I'm in Jail

Hellow Mum, Mum, this world is not my home;
Mum, why I was named after my father?
Mum, Dady was a rolling stone?
But I'll take it to the limit, but
Talk about revolution and the fast car.

Mum, I'm the black engel, and the
Death song is built, I feel like a hopeless
Child. Oh! Mum, I'm the victim of the same
Song I sing; I wanted to be with my family, but
Don't cry for me, cry for my childs,
Mum, I'm in jail, I'm waiting for my name to be call,
To be call down to the registrar of masters.

Mum, I'm in jail.

Hello Mum, I'm in Jail

Hello, Mum,
Mum, this world is not my home;
Mum, why was I named after my father?
Mum, was Daddy a rolling stone?
But I'll take it to the limit
And talk about revolution and a fast car.

Mum, I'm the black angel
And the death song is built.
I feel like a hopeless child.
Oh! Mum,
I'm a victim of the same song I sing;
I wanted to be with my family,
But don't cry for me, cry for my children.
Mum, I'm in jail,
I'm waiting for my name to be called
To be called down to the register of masters.

Mum, I'm in jail.

by Bheki Mkhize

Published *Fidelities IV*, 1998

Have Mercy on Us!

Oh! God, in your goodness, in your tenderness
Wash away our fault, wash away our sins
Wash away our guilt, purify us from sin
Have mercy on us;

For we are well aware of our fault
We have our sin constantly in minds;
Having sinned not other than you,
Having done what you regard as wrong;
You are just when you passed sentence on
Us, blemless when gave judgement. You know
We were born in guilty, as sinners of the
Moment conception, have mercy on us, until
Some joy and gladness on us, yet since you
Love sincerity of heart, teach us the secrets of
Wisdom and purify us with compassion until we clean,
Whiter than snow. Let the bones you have crushed
Rejoice again, hide your face from our sins, wipe out
All our tears.

God create us a clean hearts,
Put into us a new constant peace;
Do not banish us from your presence
Be our survivors again, renew our joy;
Open our mouth to be speak out our peace through
The people of Soviet (Dambuza)
Show your peace graciously to Dambuza people;
Wash Dambuza road and Nomponjwane road clean,
Have mercy on us.

Is it a Free Election?

I feel shame to minority government,
The racial government of foreigners;
The unfamiliars people.
Do you still peasue to praying on your
Satanism rule, an unfamiliar rule with
No humanism?
Where does all this killing of people come from?
I believe that its came from Satanism rule,
What do you think, they are?
They are the mad dogs?
I feel shame to you
Now I have a gravity, a gravity of
Your pretandance smile;

All the races are waiting
For non racial election, free and
Fere election. All the forces are
Waiting for free election
Even the black prisoners; the
Voices of apartheid are still
Waiting for it.
Is it a free election?

A New Flag of France

The adoption of colour, which was people's colour;
Like an Africans new Tricolour flag.
On July 1789, people marched and destroyed the state
Prison of France. That was called the Bastill;
The fall it became a great event in the revolution,
The day of July which is still celebrated in France.

Now I compare France like South Africa;
On February 5 '93, prisoners decided to
Stand up, talk for our rights to vote
For new flag like a new flag of France, they died
For their right to vote.
Then came march 21 uprising, through unity and
Emergence our cry did at last reach to the general
Public. But after died,
At Queenstown prison 21 prisoners died,
They were fighting for their rights to vote;
They died. We wanted to elect a new flag
Like France, be we died.

Lead me Lion!

Lead me from untruth to truth,
From darkness to light, from
Death to immortality; truth
Which equals love; I mean –
Truth force or truth love force,
Truth and love are attributes of
The soul.

Lead me Lion, lead me in the world
Of peace, hold me like pleasure,
Victory and defeat, lead me lion of
My region, the Natal Midlands,
Lead me to the high plan of dignity,
A dignity of our new South Africa.
Lead me Lion of our community,
Lion of our region, lead me hope;
Hope of Mphephethwa. Lead me Lion.

Sorry Soviet!

Sinc the activists went
Sinc the man of peace dead;
After 1991 revange of people's court;
The students of politic were stood attention
Into the high court of Maritzburg, after the
Arested of three activists; sorry Soviet people.

I embark to write a poem,
A poem of tears and pain, a
Poem about Dambuza street, which has
A bloodshed of tears, which caused by
The revange; the revange of our hero,
Hero of Soviet people; after those unneccesary
Conflict among you and others.

“Sorry Soviet! Soviet my bones will never
Get rest until Soviet people fall in peace,
Those unstopable blood thirsty must stop now;
They enough drunk the blood of our hero
Muzi Mkhize. Sorry Soviet to left you alone
To be not with you in general elections,
Sorry Soviet.”

One Heart's Fimaly

Hey there, girls!
Where are you from?
Suddenly I remember who you are.
I remember where are you from.
You looks like a ladies guerillas of Dambuza.
Will you gives me one slogan?
Will you showes me you are ladies guerrillas?
After the uprising of dust, I will show,
After singing a freedom poem for me -
You singing like the Soviet Cultural Group.
You can you tell him, he is sad?

You can tell from his eyes he is sad,
And would be capable of dying of hunger
Next to a pile of sugarcane?

To the one heart's family is one where a
Man must rely on his flocks to live.
The sin of adultery?
You forgive your brother if he steal from you?
Don't you? 'Yes, I forgive him!' because
We are the one heart's family.

One Heart's Family

Hey there, girls!
Where are you from?
Suddenly I remember who you are.
I remember where you are from.
You look like the lady guerrillas of Dambuza.
Will you give me one slogan?
Will you show me you are lady guerrillas?
After the uprising of dust, I will come,
After singing a freedom poem for me -
Your singing like the Soviet Cultural Group.

Can you tell that he is sad?
You can tell from his eyes he is sad,
and would be capable of dying of hunger
next to a pile of sugarcane.

The one heart's family is one where
a man must rely on his flocks to live.
Do you forgive adultery?
You forgive your brother if he steals from you,
Don't you? 'Yes, I forgive him.'
Because we are the one heart's family.

by Bhek'themba Mbhele
Published *Fidelities III*, 1997

Waisting our Power!

The world is too much with us;
Late and soon; getting and speeding
We waste our power, little we see in
Nature; that is ours; we have given
Our heart away; so did boom!
The sea that beire here bosom to the moon;
The wind that will blowing at all hours;
And are upgathering now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everythings we are out of time;
It moves us not great God, we'll rather be
Curcle, in cried out warn, we were waste our
Power, our own power, our own spirit,
What a right to demand rights;
We wasting our power.

We have Hit them where is Hurt!

Welcome once again warriors and comrades;
Welcome to our poetry book; for the three
Years now we have debate many issues that
Affect the conduct and growing strength for
Our movement.

Since we formed our three brave
Committee; difference committees
Disciplinary committee, street committee
And block committee, we have a
Great victories, our enemies all over
The region were afraid to attack
Dambuza; now they called their generals;
Goneval, Chendra, but their latest –
Informers attacked, sure that we have
Hit them where is hurt.

By Four Hundred Rands

An engry of the judge and his assistance
Whom wore a sunglasses; "Silent in court,
Three accuses, I keep you into the dark hole
Until I find you guilty, now I rimind your case."
My mother cried loudly;

The nine accused turn to
State witnesses by four hundred
Rands, they crossed the Long
Market street and smiled, they
Said, God helps who helps his
Self, doesn't metter how you
Gonna help yourself; I sleeped
With the past when I'm thinking
About them, about our role we
Played to liberate our country.

The community kept all of the
People's court avidance, but gave
The law court all avidance were
Our accusedby four hundred
Rands; judge said, now I have
Nine engels for this case, by
Four hundred rands.

My Good Friend

When I thinking about you, I still see your face;
I see you coming infront of me, I look you sad;
I still say farewell my good friend;
I try to keep my mind free, but that doesn't happen.
Now I try to put you down in my historic book
Like other heroes.

Farewell my good friend; my friend
When they assolted you with their knives
You blood streamed, not on your
Garment alone, it washed down the road
Of Mountainrise, your blood wrote you
Down into the history of Dambuza's heroes;
My friend I wasn't tired watching
Your active role of struggle against
Apartheid rule, but enemies becomed tired
Of watching you grow, my friend yours
Is the measure of our time, all mourn
You ever more. Farewell my good
Friend, sleep in peace Muzi Mkhize.

Free Speech

From grass roots level to the paliament
Free speech, prisons to hospitals, free speech
From the biginning of poetry to the end, free speech.

When I think about Reggy Hadebe's death
Siss, bayasinyanyisa;
When I think about killing of S'khumbuzo Ngwenya
Siss, bayasinyanyisa;
When I think about Msizi Dube's death
Siss, bayasinyanyisa;
When I think about Jabu Ndlovu's death
Siss, bayasinyanyisa;
When I think about killing of Copper Masuku
Siss, bayasinyanyisa;

When I think about massacres
Siss, bayasinyanyisa;
When I think about Bisho massacre
Siss, bayasinyanyisa;
When I think about Transfied massacre
Siss, bayasinyanyisa; Yes, when I think about
War attacks, Siss, bayasinyanyisa;
We have always know the truth
We looked at state of imagancy
Siss, bayasinyanyisa;
We looked at Bantu Education Act
Siss, bayasinyanyisa;
We looked at Group Areas Act
Siss, bayasinyanyisa;
We looked at Population Act
Siss, bayasinyanyisa.

The historic day for new South African;
 The leaders of Africans were gether together
 In Bloemfontein, yes it was January 8 1912,
 Leaders were gethered, stand up and wanted
 To form our defender, an organisation which
 Would defend our rights, they wanted to struggle
 Peacefully; struggled for country where all people's
 Of races live together as equalls, lets that be
 A historic day Africans

Our father was birth, the South
 African native National Congress, after
 The formation of the Union of S.A.
 Our defenders was birth, later was
 Named the African National Congress
 Yes, that was 1912,
 He was birth to fight against
 Racial elections; we still remember
 And we won't forget the day our
 Father was birth; we won't
 Forget you, yes, we won't forget
 1912, we will always celebrate you.

Don't Delay us!

Now we are tired,
We are tired of starvation,
We are tired of oppression and racial nepotism,
Please don't delay us Mr So and So,
Please don't delay us , don't say so and so,
Don't say this and that, don't delay us for non racial
Elections, now we are tired;

Don't delay us, we tired now
We tired of leaning a propaganda
Lessons, writing about nonsense,
Guns, and death of our Africans
Now we tired of prisons, now
We tired of writting these angry
Poems, we must leave; you must
Stop divid our people by their
Nations, we are tired of dividing
Rules because South Africa belongs
To all who live in it.
Please don't delay us, Mr Lier
Of Basuthu, now we want our
Hopes; we want elections for
All races. Don't delay us.

Poor People

Tell me what is it like to be poor?

Do you ever drink tea?

Every morning my mother boils tea, in the large pot for
The whole people, or house; tea is very sweet when you put
Sugar in it; when you don't it is very bitter, it is like poor.

Who is your father?

He is a carpenter, carpenter is a man who always puts a pen
On his ears.

I live in the home of ugly houses,

Home of low income people, the people who lives

There cannot healthy cause their house don't have
Window, I call it 'over congestion'.

Do you have house rats in your house?

A small animals which live together with poor

People. In my house there's many of rats;

Its difficult to kill it; they very smart, they eat

Our food and our finger when we sleep in the

Verandh; the rats quietly come over our mats and

Bigan to eat our fingers and toeses too;

Oh! Children don't sleep in the room, the room

Is too small for all, only father and mother;

I mean my father's wife sleep in the room;

No luxury house, no enough work,

No money to buy cause we the poor people.

Rich People

Poor people are no civilised
Do you want to be a bad girl?
How many times told you not to talk to those boys?
I have slapped you on many occasions for talking to them
Through the fence; you are a stubborn goat;
Let me see your face, you are shame of it already!
Why should you go out to play with those boys?
They are bad boys from poor homes,
You must be a good girl.

You came from good home, your father
And mother is good; we not poor people
We are rich, your father is a great lawyer
Popular and respectful all over the
Country; your mother owns a popular
Nurses. Those childrens from poor
Schools, where childrens homes are
Stinking; of the whole people also come
Dishonest, steal money; you were
Told in the nursery (those boys of
Poor) to avoid bad companies; childrens
From good homes must not
Play with childrens from bad homes;
Cause they will becomes poor and
Bad too; you should play with the
Childrens of your fathers friend,
Those bad poor boys are terrible
And I hate them.

Girl on the Run

I'm tired of running;
All my life I've been running
On the run, on the road man molesting me;
I was once a dutiful daughter; a nice Cristian home;
It was in the settled area, Cristian is the head of this
House, the unseen guest at every meal; the silent listener
To every conversation; I ran away from school cause the
Head master wanted to do wicked things with me always.

You remain behind you, take wood to my house; you take
This chalk and books to my office; then he would follow me;
And all he wanted was to touch my breast,
So I left the school; I wanted to stay at home and teach
Myself how to sow or do something with life, but
My father would have nothing of it,
He called me an idler permission; and
Sent me to pick tea leaves for
That cruel settler, Mr Bother, how he
Used to abuse me, when I do something wrong
He do not give me anything to eat for two days;
Me as a child who work on this farm, I think I should
Get time off to tea, eat lunch. I'm whipping you for
Taking time of eat without my permission;
I live and work on a farm and there's no school
Here, I had to run away from home, from father
From Mr Bother.

Seven Days War!

I remember that days; the days of war,
The days of missing and loosing our friends
The days of loosing comrades; the days of
Our attack, the killing of Rudolf.
I remember the days of 1990 uprising.

The enemy has to be wicked for without the police
The war would be wicked without the policies warlords;
An Africans in Natal Midlands hands during that
Terrible conflict worst, the mountain of Caluza was chacked
Like the boiling mud; made death seem a very acceptable
Alternative; one can not indeed consider such treatment without
Wondering what went wrong with humanity; it's difficult
To believe, but this nevertheless.

I remember that days, I
Remember the Seven Days War,
Is only one side of the picture
Doubtless at this very moment
Some poems is writing about
The Seven Days War from an
Opposite viewpoint, at last it
Was an opposite of weapons.

The Best Memories

Now I have the memory
The memory of my African heroes,
My traditional leaders, I have the memory of them;
I was not there but I know their history;
I have the best memories, best memory of Bhambatha;
Suddenly a new world open my eyes;
Suddenly a new world open my mind;
Bayete! King Sekhukhunde, king of Bapedi;
I salute you Chief Jongintaba of Bathembuland;
Bayete! King Moshoeshe, the greatest hero of Basutu;
I salute all my greatest heroes, such as King Dingane,
Makana, Motshiwana, Kgama, and the greatest hero Gadla
Mphakanyiswa, the chief by both blood custom,
The champion stick fighter, Henry Mphakanyiswa;
All are the sons of the soil,
 I memorise them, and
 I remember them.

I'm an African Fighter Man!

I serve in the forces, which guard my country
And our way of life, I'm prepare to give my life in their defence,
I will never surrender of my own free will;
If in command, I will never surrender my men,
While they still have the means to resist,
If I'm capture, I'll continue to resist by all means to
Available; I will make every effort to escape;
I'll accept neither parol no special favour from the enemy,
I'll give no information, no take party in any action
Which might be harmful to my comrades, cause I'm an African
Fighter man, and I'll always be.

If I'm a senior, I'll take command
If not I'll obey man,
When they questioned me, I will
Never answer them, I bound to
To give only name, role, and date
Of birth, I'll avade to answer
An questions of my ability,
I'll make no oral statement, disloyal
To my country, and I'll never
Forget that I'm an African fighter man,
Responsible for my action and
Dedicated to my principles which
Made my country free, I will
Trust in my God.

For the Sake of Struggle!

Oh! Yes girl of Bhungane
Of cause Queen of Makhulu Khulu;
To you Roman Catholic volunteer that was the sake of struggle,
I lefted my love deep down the heart of engel,
An engel which clup her wings at the first stop of Dambuza;
The evidance of God was to smile, to makes the sunrise;
The time of religion and love was like thumb goes to tobacco;
We prayed for our everlasting love,
We taken friends and love as an unremoved mountain;
Now I'm here too far from you, for the sake of struggle.

Those moment days, Dambuza road becomes the
Boiling mud, street lights was suddenly off;
All youths blowed the whistley; next to the coners
Guns were sounding like thunder; that was the
Sake of struggle, days of Operation Clean Up;
It was my duty to turned Dambuza road into a good condition
I was injured, I losed my leg, I contributed with my leg;
Now I don't see any shade of you
I don't see you my love, I'm in
The darker place, for the sake of struggle darly.

Please God!

Oh! God, my God I remember the year 1973;
On October 10 the baby was named as Sipho;
Please God, tell me what was that gift for?
That was a gift suffering or oppression gift?
God now I'm in the sque pack of a round hole;
From where I stay there's no mother no father,
I celebrate my birth day by tears.

My God, before I sleep I'm doing the Roman cross;
The Roman cross as a road leading me to the bright
Future.

Please God! bring love, joy and peace to me.

My Comrades

My dear comrades! My dear comrades,
I know more than another;
I know what makes you sad, what makes you angry;
Not even your parents can know it as I know,
Who makes you angry, never mind comrades,
I shall have some peace there, for peace dropping
Slow, dropping from the sky, peace dropping from
Trio, dropping from the venue of poets like
The hero Mzwakhe Mbule, like the hero William
Butler who was born in Dublin, died in southern France,

Comrades, now I left peace on you;
I'll rise and go,
Thank you, comrades
Goodbye now.

Mother of Mercy

When I'm wrong, no body forget, but
When I'm right, no body remember,
No body know the trouble I've seen.
When my days are dark, friends are few,
Good girls goes to heaven, but bad girls goes
To any where.

Mother of mercy, I pray for love, joy, peace,
And happiness to be present at my home,
Now I'm in the sadness place, but I'll never
Blame my creator and my mothors stamack,
But mother of mercy is the master.

Burning *

It burns, always burns,
So few words spoken,
So little needs to be said,
The air is hot and heavy,
I face the ocean and warm,
My breath comes harder
I need air
Humid breeze reaches towards my face
But I get hotter,
Rain is beating upon me,
But is not cool
Hot always hot.
And wind chimes sing,
Reminding me of the ocean
Breeze blowing aimlessly
Around the sell.
It never reaches me,
Never cool me at all,
It burns, hell.
The last sunlight has faded,
And beginning of twilight
Is illuminating what left of the day,
Casting dark and deep shadow
Around the sell.
A roaring ocean, so loud, suddenly every
Sound and shape seems loud and sharp.
But I am still burning.

* Original draft (2000)
(Not in *We Waiting in the Dark*.)

Burning

It burns, always burns
So few words spoken
So little needs to be said.
The air is hot and heavy.
I face the ocean and the warm air
My breath comes harder,
I need air.
A humid breeze reaches my face
But I get hotter,
The rain is beating on me
But it is not cool
Hot always hot.
And wind chimes sing
Reminding me of the ocean
Breeze blowing aimlessly
Around the cell.
It never reaches me,
Never cools me at all
It burns, hell.
The last sunlight has faded
And the beginning of twilight
Is illuminating what is left of the day,
Casting dark and deep shadows
Around the cell
A roaring ocean, so loud,
Suddenly every sound and shape
Seems loud and sharp.
But I am still burning.

by Bheki Mkhize

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Distance Love *

Distance, you too far to comfort
Distance, I think about every nights
Distance, if you can hear me now
Singing through lonely night
Dreaming on your hands held me so.

Distance, I hope you never far
From where I am.
Distance, I have that feeling
When I come out you will be the
Song that heal my wounds.

Distance, when I open my door
I seen no one,
when I close my door I feel empty.
The feelings are getting strong
everyday
I wrote more and more everyday,
Everyday I try so hard
Everyday I sit and wonder
Distance, if you ever loose my love
I will help you to find.

* Original draft (2000)
(Not in *We Waiting in the Dark*)

Distance Love

Distance, you too far to comfort
Distance, I think about you every night
Distance, if you can hear me now
Singing through the lonely night
Dreaming how your hands held me so.

Distance, I hope you never far
From where I am.
Distance, I have that feeling
When I come out you will be the
Song that will heal my wounds.

Distance, when I open my door
I see no one
when I close my door I feel empty.
The feelings are getting stronger every day
I write more and more everyday,
Everyday I try so hard
Everyday I sit and wonder
Distance, if you ever lose my love
I will help you to find her.

by Bheki Mkhize
Published *Fidelities X* (2003)

Do not Cry *

My loveble,
My little one . . .
A man graveyard always next to his path.
Hush my little darling do not cry
Do not shed no tears.
When I remember the hush . . .
I've been gone through.
In this great future, you've got to fight
The best you can to find a better place
For you.
We used to mingle with all kind of
People. Bad friend have and good
Friend we have lost along the way
In this sycological punishment.

This regardless secret I wish I can
Share with you,
This cricess with no tears.
Yes! I've no tears 'cause I've no
Reason to cry. Love is on my mind.
You have found me in this shameful
Hollow. I was lonely and so sad.
You build a home for this heart of mine
So please wipe all your tears.
No P No cry 'cause everything is
Gonna be alright.

by Bheki Mkhize (2000)
(Not in *We Waiting in the Dark*)

INTERVIEW No. 1.

INTERVIEW BETWEEN JACOBUS MOOLMAN (JM) AND MORNA MACLEOD (MM).

DATE: 29 August 2002.

VENUE: no. 94, Silent Heights, Pietermaritzburg.

JM: Yes, I have this [a copy of *Fidelities III*, 1997] already. You see I edit this particular book. Is this the only thing you have of Siphos? You don't perhaps have an exercise book with his writing in it?

MM: Yes, I seem to remember seeing one. That he showed me . . . Could I ask straight away now, where you think Siphos is now?

JM: I actually don't know where he is.

MM: I see.

JM: I also wanted to ask you if you knew where he was.

MM: This is what I was going to say to you because . . . I'm not exactly sure where he is now either. I was going to phone at the hospital. Because he went up to Jo'burg. Now I never really got the story fully. Because he came here one morning. And he said I'm going to Johannesburg this afternoon and I need some money. And it's some firm or other down in Durban that . . . he'd been down to Durban a couple of times . . . they sponsor them or something to do a course and he went up there for three months.

JM: What course is this?

MM: Well, this is what I'm not sure. It's a business course.

JM: You see the thing is – I'm not sure if it's his brother or a relation – do you know Bhek'themba?

MM: Oh, that's a cousin.

JM: He came out last year.

MM: Yes, that's right. Bhek'themba and Bheki –

JM: And Bheki's still inside. Now I have I think a number for Bhek'themba. So I thought I would start here with you. Check with you. And then follow up with Siphos and Bhek'themba and Bheki. But you say now you haven't seen Siphos for quite a while.

MM: Oh, now this is the thing. I mean he went up to Jo'burg.

JM: When was that?

MM: Where are we now? The end of August? I would say it was the early part of this month. Or the latter part of last month. But I suddenly got a phone call from Edendale Hospital. That's why I thought perhaps I should just phone them. And find out . . . Apparently what had happened. You know of his amputated leg?

JM: Yes.

MM: Well, something has gone wrong with the leg, the stitching part of it, and he had seen a doctor in Jo'burg, and the doctor wanted to know who had done the operation because – this is what I've been told, you see – he had to come back here to the hospital where the operation was done. And they transported him down here and left him at Edendale Hospital. So that he could have attention. So he must have

come down overnight and phoned me in the morning to say that he was at the hospital and could I come and see him. And when I got there he still hadn't seen . . . he'd been in the hospital, he'd got his papers. And that's the last I've heard from him, you see. And I said now what do you think they're going to do? And he said this has got to . . . they've got to look at this and see whether they're going to stitch it. And I said do you think you're going to be here. And he said I don't know. And I said do you think they're going to send you to Wentworth, because that's where he had a lot of things done. And he said he didn't know. But he said the doctor's supposed to be seeing me today.

JM: Well, the best thing for me I think I will try and contact Bhek'themba and also perhaps the hospital itself to see what's happened to him.

MM: He might have to have it re-stitched or something and then get a new fitting or something.

JM: How did he actually lose his leg? Do you know? I don't know much about him at all.

MM: Right, his history. My connection –

JM: Yes, I'm interested to know how you got connected with these three guys.

MM: Well, their aunt worked at Girls High.

JM: Sipho's aunt.

MM: She came from Mpumalanga and she lived here at school you see. She was there for a long time. It's a very sad story, you see, because she was a diabetic and she couldn't eat the right things, when I say that I mean she couldn't afford to and she somehow or another got a sore on her foot and well, Mpumalanga is near that hospital Mariannhill and so she went to the Mariannhill Hospital and they gave her some medicine and they sent her home again. They said there wasn't room in the hospital. And the foot got worse and she eventually had to have it amputated. But she was still managing after she'd had it done to come to school, but she still wasn't able to feed herself with the appropriate foods which diabetics have to take, and she eventually had to have the leg amputated. I must say that her son was most helpful. I'd been very helpful to him too because he used to be a policeman you see and he had to pay out some things. Anyway that's beside the point. Anyway she didn't last very long. Her sister was Sipho's mother. And I knew about them you see and the whole family . . . when I say that, those people lived in Mpumalanga – but Sipho's family lived here in Edendale.

JM: And that's now Sipho and Bheki, they are blood brother and Bhek'themba is then the cousin?

MM: That's right and now I'm not quite sure. I think that it had happened already. You see during the troubled times, you know when they had –

JM: In the eighties.

MM: That's right. People had come and smashed up their house.

JM: Burnt it or just smashed it?

MM: Smashed it up. Made it impossible to live in. And the two boys plus the cousin went on a revenge see, plus friends.

JM: Do you know if Sipho was politically active during that time? Did you know much about him before?

MM: Well this is what I say. You see they went on a revenge and they landed in trouble because the people they went to who had smashed up their house then were able

to fight them off and they used guns. That's why Sipho lost his leg.

JM: So he was shot?

MM: Yes. But there again . . . they tell me he was shot in the foot, and his leg was amputated up here [below the knee].

JM: Maybe it went septic or something.

MM: Well, Bheki or somebody went to the hospital to find out why they had amputated up here when it was just his foot and again they had a feeling that whoever operated on him in the hospital was the opposite side. The opponent. Now that's as I heard it. And it took a long time with the court case and so on.

JM: Now why were they – what were they sentenced for then?

MM: Well, attacking the other people. But that's why I say it's a mystery to me.

JM: Were they involved in – Did they actually end up, one must talk straight here, murdering – ?

MM: I don't think so. I think possibly some were injured.

JM: Because they received quite a lengthy sentence.

MM: Yes. And this is what I cannot understand, why they haven't been . . . you know, because that was definitely during the troubled times and there were so many people who were pardoned –

JM: Why they could not have applied for amnesty?

MM: And especially like Bheki's still sitting there.

JM: What did they get? They certainly got more than ten years.

MM: I think Sipho was released early, because of his leg. And now you say that Bhek'themba came out last year. Well, I really don't know about . . . Bheki I think was given fifteen years. Now this is where I think Bheki actually committed some sort of serious thing – Part of the same incident. Well, this is where I'm not sure whether there was a death.

JM: Bheki I know has been transferred to Sevontein.

MM: You see it's extraordinary. I mean in prison even when he was here he was more in the offices –

JM: Exactly. He had a very privileged status.

MM: Absolutely. Because a couple of times – I forgot what I was going there for – maybe it was for Sipho and they would say to me oh just go through he's in the kitchen . . .

JM: So you would go often and visit them. All three or just Sipho?

MM: Well, shall I tell you? Sipho and I couldn't talk to each other when I first went because Sipho didn't speak English. You know, Bheki –

JM: Bheki's always been the most –

MM: Advanced. Well, Sipho I gather had only gone as far as standard three or something like that. This is why I think he's extraordinary. That he can write things. I mean I've had letters from him. There are obvious mistakes and things, you know, he puts things in the wrong place. That he can . . . you know . . . get up on the stage and perform and have his own drama group, and things like that. He's quite extraordinary.

JM: I often wonder why they got into writing. Do you have any idea perhaps?

MM: Well, when you mentioned that on the phone, you see, and I thought now – well, I didn't know them before they went to prison you see, but there they had two women social workers and I'm not sure if it was the white one or the African one

who got them interested in . . . And you see there was somebody there who was keen on drama.

JM: In the group – the section.

MM: In that sort of thing. And I would say that the white lady was Afrikaans speaking.

JM: Did you ever meet her?

MM: Yes. But I'm not sure whether either of them did the actual drama or if it was somebody from outside that came in. I have a feeling it was somebody from outside

–

JM: Who did workshops with them perhaps?

MM: Yes.

JM: Did you ever lend them any books or give them any reading material? I'm quite interested to find out. Because I'm looking at the writing that they produced and I'm trying to understand or work out if there had been any influences upon their writing, other than what I myself did with them in particular workshops or what I might have lent them. Did you lend them any books, that they might have read and got ideas from? All writers borrow from other writers. It's the most natural thing. You can't remember?

MM: There would only have been – I can't remember any specific books as such – but I could have given them magazines – *Readers Digest*, things like that.

JM: Of a popular nature.

MM: That's right. Yes.

JM: Did they send you any of their writing? Over the years. When you say that Sipho wrote letters to you. Did he ever give you any of his poetry?

MM: Well, it's just more recently that he started writing. But he advanced so quickly. And I mean to speak English, when I think of it here I've been in Natal for so long and I can't speak any Zulu. I mean I've been here in Natal for thirty years. You see I've got this [indicates a dictionary]. Not that I refer to it very often. But it's a . . . a sort of . . .

JM: Oh yes, with some words in Zulu and English.

MM: And gradually I've learnt a few things but – I'm just trying to think if there's – what else there was. You see they seemed to get so involved in doing drama and things like that so early on and I mean they were forever coming here to the Hexagon Theatre.

JM: I arranged for Sipho and Bheki, I think, I'm not sure, to come out and read some of their poetry one night at a poetry book launch. Ninety-nine, I think. I'm not actually sure. I must check. And I didn't know that they'd been out before that to come and do such things. I haven't been able to contact them so I thought I'd start with you then try and see if you knew where they were. Or what the story was. So when I go and speak to them I at least have a clearer idea.

MM: That's why I say I can't, you know, I never sort of kept check of when I've done it . . . But you know with Sipho almost as soon as he came out of prison he got a drama group together and started with them.

JM: I know – I went to one of their performances that they did. They had these little mini festivals in Ashdown. Possibly the year before last, I think. That was the last one I went to – I enjoyed it immensely. And then he also arranged a walk of some kind, I think.

MM: Oh, right. yes. I've got a letter that he wrote to me. To tell me about that. [Break.]

This is a letter he wrote to me.

JM: That's right. The S'bansezwe Cultural Group. This address here is that . . . ?

MM: Well, it's not quite correct, you see.

JM: Why?

MM: I mean – This could be his here – It could be his. He lives at Ashdown. But I think this is the . . . You see that's the . . .

JM: The name of their group.

MM: Yes, I'm sure this isn't where he lives. This is . . . I'm trying to think. There's a circle there. And that's where their sort of government offices are. And I would say that that's where this is. The telephone number is mine. And he's got my address here. This Panorama Garden, I don't know where that is. It's not here at all.

JM: Did you actually go to this particular function?

MM: We missed each other. In fact there seemed to have been a bit of a muddle up. Because the hall that they were to use, near that circle . . . I went there. I knew where it was.

JM: The Ashdown Community Hall.

MM: That's right. There was a funeral going on. They'd sort of made a mistake. Not them – but the people who said they could use the hall.

JM: They'd double-booked it.

MM: Yes. Double-booked it. And I didn't actually find Sipho anywhere. I rode around everywhere. And I didn't know where he was. Yes, I mean I rode around and I stopped and asked people if they knew where . . . But you see, it sort of broke down a little bit. When I say that – They couldn't have it. I don't know whether they even met. It was a shame, because they . . . This was the thing, because he always did things like this. He brought me a gift for doing this. But he had to bring it here another time because we never met.

JM: What did he bring you?

MM: He brought me a tray.

JM: A tray that he had actually made himself?

MM: No, no. It had been bought.

JM: Did he ever give you anything that he had made in prison?

MM: Yes. Both of them did.

JM: Both he and . . . ?

MM: Bheki.

JM: What did they give you?

MM: Let me show you. [Break.] At some stage they were sent somewhere . . . or Bheki was sent to one of these inland prisons. And spent a while there. And that's where he learnt the skill. I'm not quite sure where the big table cloth is.

JM: Did they make a table cloth?

MM: Well, yes, with paint. This is the thing he's so artistic. And . . . I'm not quite sure where it is at the moment.

JM: I know this would be made with soap.

MM: That's right. Yes.

JM: With soap and cardboard. They mix soap and cardboard to make these . . . I suppose you could call them candle holders. This could be a candle holder perhaps. These two.

MM: Could be.

JM: And this is a flower pot of some kind.

MM: Yes.

JM: And that's a very large ashtray. [Laughter.] I know that NICRO has an annual art competition for prisons. I often wondered if any of them took part. I don't think they did. It's not just art, it's also writing.

MM: You see, Sipho had to almost start from scratch. Not being able to walk around and do things. To start with he was on crutches in prison.

JM: Oh was he?

MM: Yes, he was on crutches for quite a long time. And – I don't know all that much about it – but I presume that this had to heal properly, before he could have any sort of artificial leg . . . And . . . The thing he did do in prison was – one of the first things I noticed about him – was that – when I visited one day I said, tell me why do you – why is your prison uniform not the same as the others? Oh, he said, I put – he put a collar on and he put a pocket on. He had added these things to his prison uniform. And then he started doing it for some of the others as well – improving their uniforms.

JM: I wonder where he learnt to sew.

MM: Well this is the thing, you see, these social workers taught him to do sewing, because he could not do the other things that the prisoners had to do. And he learnt his sewing in prison.

JM: You wouldn't – I don't think – Would you remember any of the names of these social workers?

MM: Well, this is the thing. I tried this morning. I thought now – but I just don't remember them.

JM: They might remember themselves.

MM: Well, I was going to say, they probably would remember them. And I had a feeling that I might have written them down. Well, I have, but it's not in my phone book so I must have written them on a piece of paper . . . But they were very helpful to these chaps.

JM: Did you meet or make contact with any of the other men in prison?

MM: Well, I've got another thing that I know where it is. It was made by a white prisoner out of matchsticks.

JM: What is it?

MM: Well, shall I show you?

[Break. MM exits. Returns with a wooden box.]

JM: How did you actually come to have this?

MM: Oh, dear, that's another story.

JM: That's lovely.

MM: Isn't it.

JM: That's very lovely. A box made out of matchsticks.

MM: It's quite extraordinary. Now I'm not sure whether it was just Sipho or Bheki and Sipho, who bought it from this man and then they gave it to me.

JM: That's lovely . . . They bought it from him.

MM: Yes. Very intricate. Imagine the patience doing that.

JM: I think that's sort of all I've got for the moment.
MM: I'm sorry that I'm not sort of so au fait with some of these things. But I've had to sort of cast things aside and continue with other things. Ja, Sipho has – I mean I know more about him than anything else. Because you know he has struggled since he's been out in that he's looking after Bheki's children.
JM: Oh, does Bheki have children?
MM: Yes.
JM: How many children does he have?
MM: There are three.
JM: School-going children?
MM: Yes, oh yes. I mean the one is nearly doing matric I think already. And – I mean, Sipho hasn't any children. But Sipho took it on. And his mother hasn't been any help either.
JM: So Sipho's mother is still alive?
MM: Yes. But she's no good.
JM: In what way? [MM makes the sign of drinking.] Oh really?
MM: Ja. And there is another relation. I'm not quite sure where they are – And he – the thing is it's unbelievable the things that have happened to Sipho. In that he came out and he went straight into this drama thing, but so often –

TAPE ENDS.

INTERVIEW No. 2.

INTERVIEW BETWEEN JACOBUS MOOLMAN (JM), BHEK'THEMBA MBHELE (BM)
AND SIPHO MKHIZE (SM)

DATE: 7 September 2002

VENUE: Tatham Art Gallery Coffee Shop

JM: These are copies of the new *Fidelities* that came out last week . . . There's an interesting poem inside here . . . You know, this is very interesting . . . There's a guy called Mzwandile Matiwana . . . You know, this is very interesting. Because of the times when I published your poetry in *Fidelities* – I don't know how this man found out – He is in a prison, I think it is in Mpumalanga, he's inside. And I don't know how he found *Fidelities*. But he found it somehow. Maybe somebody gave it to him inside. And he saw your writing. And then he wrote me a letter saying he'd enjoyed the poetry very much. Can he also give me some of his poetry? Can I have a chance to publish his poetry? Look on page twenty-nine. I like that: 'the key shouted at me'.

BM: 'The bars lamented'. Lamented. Really. That's the truth.

JM: I must send him these copies. The book only came out last week. It just also shows how what we are writing does grow beyond us. It does reach other people.

BM: This is very interesting.

JM: Now Sipho I interrupted you. You were talking about this picture. [Indistinct. Sipho discusses a drawing of himself on crutches. He talks about conditions inside the prison. How he was beaten by the warders if he asked for help from Bhek'themba to carry his tray of food. How they slept on the floor.] When did you get your artificial leg? [Indistinct.] You were inside in?

SM: Ninety-one.

JM: So for four years you were walking – you were inside like that [on crutches]. You were different the first time I saw you. The very very first time. I'm sure you were walking with crutches. It was before you guys were in G-block. The first time I came inside. I came with Mdu. And he was doing some art workshops. I think it was drawing or something. And you were all in one room together.

BM: That was in the old prison.

JM: Yes, before the prison was revamped. Before the new buildings came. That was the very first time I remembered seeing Sipho. I think he was on crutches. [Indistinct.] Could you run on crutches?

BM: Fast, fast, fast, you can't believe it. Because things was really happening.

JM: What do you mean things were really happening?

BM: Gangsters. So you have to watch out.

SM: And sometimes I would hit them.

JM: With your crutch?

BM: Just to protect yourself.

JM: It was your weapon. [Indistinct.] Bhek'themba, I'm interested in your schooling. What schooling did you do? I'll tell you why I'm asking –

BM: Standard eight.

JM: You finished standard eight. I'll tell you why I'm asking. Because I also need to understand how much people have been influenced by other things which you have read. Because when I look at writing I have an idea, people got this poem maybe from lyrics they were listening to or other things. There's one particular poem – I can't remember who wrote it – but the lyrics I think were influenced by something from Bob Marley. The song from Bob Marley, "No woman. No cry". And as I'm doing this research I need to be able to say, ja, this person had read these books, and was aware of different things. It would even be interesting to say no, no, they weren't. This came straight out of their own mind. So – where did you school?

BM: Bongudunga High.

JM: Yes, I know Bongudunga High. That's where you completed standard eight?

BM: Yes.

JM: And you did English in school as one of your subjects?

BM: Yes, it was one of my subjects.

JM: Can you remember when you were doing school – I know it's a long time ago – what books they gave you when you were doing English? Or were there some books they gave you that you particularly enjoyed?

BM: Like literature?

JM: Ja. [Bhek'themba thinks for a long time.] Did they give you poetry?

BM: Poetry, ja, ja. They gave us poetry. There was a book that was called *Modern Poetry*. I used to read it. Several times.

JM: When you guys were inside did you have a library that you could go to? Did you have books to read? Did you read when you were inside?

BM: Yes.

SM: Yes, but when we were D-group they didn't allow us a ball pen. [Indistinct.] But we steal books.

JM: Where do you get the books from?

SM: From those who are allowed to have books.

JM: And can you give me an example of some of the books that you did steal and read.

BM: Like *baptism of fire*. It was written by Ben Dikobe Martins.

JM: And that's a collection of poetry?

BM: Ja.

JM: And that all of you read?

BM: Ja.

JM: You were very interested in it?

BM: We used to contact him. To give us an idea. We'd like to do this. How do we do this? And *Dreams will Come True*. In Zulu *Ayofezeka Amaphupho*. By the Imbali Youth. Talking about the violence, the struggle.

JM: Where is this book?

BM: It's available in the library.

JM: Written in Zulu?

BM: Written in English and Zulu. [Indistinct.]

JM: This book sounds very important. You say, you guys got that. In prison.

SM: We steal that book.

JM: But where did it come from?

SM: The prison library.

JM: That's a strange book for them to have.

BM: *Ayofezeka Amaphupho. And Dreams will Come True.* And really. They did come true. They did.

JM: I must get it.

BM: You must. It's very interesting. Because it can give you the history of Imbali. It can give you the picture what was happening during the struggle at Imbali. You can even know who was the perpetrators of that violence. It's very interesting.

JM: So that book you all shared and you were reading it together?

BM: Because we were staying in the same cell.

JM: All three of you?

BM: Ja. Staying in one cell. Me and Bheki and Sipho in a single cell in fact. But we were allowed to stay together.

JM: Why were you together?

SM: We were afraid. There were a lot of things. It was the first time for us. Maybe Bheki he will join the gangsters. Although I know him he is strong I want to encourage him every time. Because there are a lot of things . . .

JM: That could distract you, pull you away.

BM: Look where we are now, because of his encouragement, and even my encouragement. We were encouraging each other. 'Look guys, let's forget about the struggle. Let's focus on how to improve our lives.'

JM: But now the interesting thing is that poetry was part of that process. Of strengthening each other. Protecting you from everything else.

SM: [Handing over an exercise book, *Amasosha Ngaphandle Khwezikhali*] This is a book where we concentrated our lives. We say we are supposed to write this book to say we are the *amasosha*. The soldiers without an army. The way the book protected us.

JM: Was this written inside?

SM: By us.

JM: All three of you?

BM: All three of us. Long time ago.

JM: But were you allowed to write this? What group were you by this stage?

SM: From D. into A.

BM: It was a smuggle. Let me say that. When some of the prison warder peep through the window we used to hide.

SM: But we use *Echo* to publish poetry, to publish letters, to make them to enjoy our culture.

JM: This other one [an exercise book of poems] that you've given me, was it also written inside?

SM: Yes.

JM: What is the difference between this one and that one?

SM: Here I was alone here.

JM: So this you wrote by yourself. For yourself.

BM: This is Zulu poetry. So there's a difference. Because this [the autobiography] is his work.

JM: His own work. His own poetry. Whereas this is all written by three of you. But what do you mean you write it together? How? Does one person write one poem,

and then the next person writes one? Or do you write one poem together?

BM: Not one poem together. Each person writes his own poem and puts it together to one book. And encouraging each other – saying no, just put it this way – how if we . . . Which is a very important day, a dangerous day during the bloodshed when the prisoners were stabbing one another, we used to write it down. On 20 November 1993 three prisoners died, on November 1994 four prisoners were stabbed by another prisoner, we used to write it here. I don't know how can I call this. It's a diary.

SM: All the things we see happening.

JM: Right from '93 down to '96.

BM: The prison violence – when the gangsters were stabbing each other.

JM: Now these stories also . . . ?

SM: Short stories from life in Dambuza. And life in prison.

BM: But it is very unfortunate that it is written in Zulu.

JM: No, I don't think it is unfortunate. I would like to use this if I can. I will have to work with you guys to help me translate it into English so I can read it.

BM: That's no problem, because we want you to understand everything. Like this title, 'Phumuza inyawo', in English, just rest, rest your feet – where we were together and resting and analysing the future, analyse the struggle, analyse what was happening during the day, analyse the whole of the situation in South Africa. Do we involve ourselves in the struggle? If we cannot, why? Why, if we involve ourselves? Why? What is the most important thing?

JM: And it's all written in this book?

BM: It's all written here. This is the start of our involvement in the struggle. 'Phumuza inyawo.' When we start to involve ourselves in the struggle.

JM: And that was probably back to when you were young people?

BM: Ja, our youth.

JM: How young, maybe twelve? [Laughter.]

BM: During this time we were too young. Maybe Sipho was sixteen years if I'm not mistaken.

SM: From fourteen years. But we went to prison when I was twenty-four years old. But we used to think about life.

JM: Where did you school? Also Bongudunga?

SM: No, Caluza.

JM: So you went to different schools and you lived in different areas?

BM: Not different areas. One area, but different schools. In fact, he's my relative. Sipho's father and my mother are brother and sister.

JM: What happened to your father then? Is he still alive?

SM: He died. It was early. I was one year.

BM: Long ago. I don't even recognize his face. I was too young.

JM: [To Bhék'themba] Is your mother still alive?

BM: Ja, she's still alive.

JM: [To Sipho] And your mother?

SM: Ja.

BM: They're old now. Old ladies. [Indistinct.]

SM: My feelings were positive to be at school, but life, our background was too hard. I was staying with my mother. By that time my mother, you know, she was

drinking. My sister died. I was supposed to take care of my sister's child. So I lost the school at that time.

JM: So you had to come home to look after things at home?

SM: Even now I'm crying.

JM: But this is why for me it's so important that this poetry, these stories are available.

[END OF SIDE B]

JM: Did you each write the same thing and then you look at it and you decide?

BM: We all focus on the one issue. We say no, this issue is important. Who can talk about this? Sipho, can you manage to talk about this? Sipho say, yes, I can talk about it. With a great, great spirit I can talk about it. Even Bheki too, I can talk about this. So we were encouraging each other.

JM: But is it painful for you to talk about those days now?

BM: Very, very painful. We are very sad. But now let us forgive and forget. Let's forget.

JM: Is it difficult for you when we are like this, to talk about those days?

BM: Ja, it's difficult. But because we are men we have to face it as it is. To talk about it. But it is difficult because it was a very tough time. Tough time. Tough time.

SM: I want to mention that we have one tablet to make us forget, you know. I'll say thank's God, if we have something from the library . . . we say we won't do that until we out. And I was watching Bhek'themba. He was watching me.

JM: To make sure that you didn't go that way.

SM: All those things – it's not easy. But if you're the writer you use good language to explain those things. But you supposed to know the real things that are happening.

JM: You see this is why for me this is also important what we are doing.

BM: Sipho is coming back to your question now what was the most important thing to encourage you to write poetry. Now we say if you are looking at something very painful, you say how can I express this thing? Let me take my pen and write it down.

SM: And I won't forget the editor from *Echo*. But at that time I don't remember who was there. That article we made – it was a smuggle – we use Bhek'themba's mother – go and post it for us.

JM: The poetry you had written.

BM: No, it was an article. About Reggie Hadebe. Our best article. About Reggie Hadebe's assassination.

JM: Was that article published?

BM: It was.

JM: Have you got copies of that?

SM: The library can help us. We find a different thing in prison, if you publish something you will find a forfeit to the head of the prison. Maybe sometimes they will take two or one month to your sentence.

JM: More?

SM: Put more.

JM: Did you use your name?

SM: Yes. Because this is real. We believe in that.

JM: So even though you knew that if they found it they would punish you, by giving you a longer sentence.

BM: We knew that very well. Because at the first time they took us to the charge office. A big man with a big voice ask us, 'Are you Sipho Mkhize?' We say, yes. 'And you and you?' We say, yes. 'Do you know this?'

JM: Was this the poetry or the *Echo* or the book?

BM: It was an article, about the gangsters in prison. The title was . . . 'Dogs who are thirsty for blood.'

JM: Was it also in *Echo*?

BM: Yes. So we were talking about the gangsters. They were thirsty for blood.

JM: Do you know the dates [of these articles]?

BM: 1993.

SM: We were busy 1993, '94, '95 . . .

BM: It was during the death of Chris Hani.

SM: *Echo* was part of the [indistinct] to us when we were starting to write poetry.

JM: Did you read poetry in *Echo*?

SM: Yes, we make sure. We send one of the prison warders. We need *Echo*.

JM: So *Echo* was for you important?

BM: Yes. We were not only criticizing. Even to recommend something we used *Echo*?

JM: And were those things published?

BM: Ja

SM: Like NICRO. One of the ladies who worked for NICRO – the way she took care – We saw something good which is unusual to see something good when you are in prison. [Indistinct.]

JM: I want to ask you something – when I read some of the poetry . . . some of you talk about something called 'blue bansh'. What is that?

BM: 'Blue bansh' is another name of prisoners, especially the long-time prisoners. Those who are serving long sentence. We used to call it a 'blue bansh'. And if you always get in prison, in, out, in, out, in order to say – how can I put this – he's a . . . he's always come in prison. He's a long service prisoner.

SM: He's not even sorry.

BM: This your gogo's home . . . 'Blue bansh'!

JM: That's very interesting because I'm reading a lot of books by other people who've spent time inside. And there's a writer called Herman Charles Bosman. He . . . I still don't know whether he was innocent or not . . . I think he . . . he says it was an accident . . . because he shot . . . he killed his brother-in-law. Or step-brother? He says it was accident, but I'm not sure, maybe he did it on purpose. And this was in the forties. The nineteen forties. Even before that. And in that book, he writes about . . . he calls it in Afrikaans 'blou baadjie'. A 'baadjie' is a jacket. A coat. He calls it a blue coat. And that was in the thirties. And now here you're using the same language. Mixing Zulu and Afrikaans. It was so interesting for me to read that. Because he was in Pretoria Maximum. He was on Death Row, he was there for some time and then they – I don't know if they pardoned him or something, but then he got hard labour. So he wasn't executed. He was released from prisoner after eight years or nine years . . . I don't know how to go forward with this. I need your advice . . . Would it be okay with you if I found somebody who could translate this for me?

BM: I like this title . . . It can give you much information, this title . . . 'Kwasuka esamathambo entsheni', which in English means there was a conflict among the youth in Dambuza. This is very interesting. Especially to know what was life like in Dambuza, really. The whole life of Dambuza. Definitely, sure, you can find it here. The start of the violence. About our area in Dambuza. Because Dambuza has too many areas. Different areas. Here we are concentrating on our area.

SM: Ja, ja. Dambuza which is the cause which made us to be in prison.

BM: So that is why we wrote this, because as far as we are concerned Dambuza is the main cause for us to be in prison. Otherwise everything was happy.

SM: Our concentration when we started to write this book, we say we won't concentrate to the business, money, as long as we have a real book, young people, you know, young children, if you give them some lesson, you know, we have real thing. More than ball pen.

JM: Maybe we should stop now. Our minds are getting tired. Let's us make another time to meet. Can we do that? [*Indistinct*]

SM: And we have an advantage here. Most of the things [in *Amasosha Ngaphandle Khwezikhali*] they make you learn about life. Instead of . . . criticizing. Although there are serious things, but every short story finishes alright. To make you . . .

JM: Feel good about life.

END.

INTERVIEW No. 3.

INTERVIEW BETWEEN JACOBUS MOOLMAN (JM) AND SIPHO MKHIZE (SM)

DATE: 14 September 2002

VENUE: Office of Jacobus Moolman in the Tatham Art Gallery

SM: When I was growing I was living with my mother in Dambuza, but I realised late that my mother . . . that surname I had is not the surname Mkhize. My surname is Duma. But my mother was married to a Mkhize.

JM: Who is Duma?

SM: It's my father's surname. My step-father's surname is Mkhize. I grow at the Mkhize family.

JM: Did you know your father Duma?

SM: I know when he's died. When I found his home he's already died. I found his firstborn.

JM: How old were you when he died?

SM: At 1973. The same with my stepfather. When I ask now to his boy when he died he says '93.

JM: Were your mother and your father divorced?

SM: Yes. My mother was married to an Mkhize. My mother doesn't want to tell me because I'm a last born and I'm a baby now at my home. She thought sometime she will lose me. I find that when she's drinking, talking with someone whose surname is Duma, she says this is belong to your surname. I heard that when I was young.

JM: Can you explain that?

SM: We have culture that if you using wrong surname sometimes you are going to be mad. You know, we believe that people died are not died. If you die, I'm still believe that you going with me. If I want something I pray to you, please ask God to help me. I take you as an angel, if you my brother or my father . . . I say thanks God. To have five room for my mother. Miss Macleod was part and parcel of that, when I building that home. But when I was growing I lose school, I lose my leg, I went to prison. All that thing was bad to me, I say, ja, God now doesn't look at me as a person. I realised that when I came in prison. I remember my mother when she's drunk talking with some people who using the Duma surname. I was supposed to find out that. It's hard to me to ask her. I was afraid to ask her, even now. I went to Hammarsdale, because she told I was born at Hammarsdale township, and her young sister was at Hammarsdale. Maybe my mother's sister knows something. I was supposed to go to her and find out. Unfortunately, when I thought that, she died. I went to Hammarsdale to the funeral of the sister of my mother, my aunt. At that time when I was at the funeral . . . I came out of prison August 16 1999. She died in November 1999, when I thought to go to her, to ask her. I failed to ask her. I saw one of the old ladies at the funeral. I ask her, do you know something when my mother was young? Because I took her as my granny. I know her for such a long time. She said, ja, your mother and your auntie was growing in front of me. I say no, I want to know something, you don't know

nothing about my father. She said, hey, don't ask me that. I doesn't drink for the whole day. Go and ask your mother. Although if I drink something . . . I was lucky I had some money. I buy beer for her. I say please tell me. She said your family will hit me if I told you. It's their business. There's no need to involve me, although I know something. I'm trying to ask her – even if she's drunk she doesn't want to tell me. She said go to your mother. I go back from Hammarsdale to Maritzburg. I was proud that I was going to ask my mother. When I saw her I was afraid. I say, no, I'm going to Hammarsdale again next week. I did that. I came to this old lady. She said no, you worrying me every time. Your father died. Go to Hammarsdale Unit 3, you will find his firstborn. But I can't say I'm sure. I went to Unit 3 at Hammarsdale. I tried to ask people, where's Duma's place. They say we doesn't know Duma's place. His son is popular at Unit 3. They doesn't call him with his surname. They call him with 'baard'. He has a big 'baard'. They call him 'Ntshebe'. They say we know 'Ntshebe'. One young boy show me his home. I went there. I find him. When I look 'baard' I say no that's 'Ntshebe'. When I came there I saw his face. When I take a mirror I saw my face. We are the same. He's my brother. I told him that I'm trying to find out my father. I told him about surname everything. They came to Hammarsdale from Durban with his father. It was 1972. He say if you born before seventies I will say, no, he's not your father. If it was later seventy-two I will agree with you.

JM: When were you born?

SM: 1973. September 10. He ask me everything. He say no, I remember that time. My father was here at Hammarsdale. Although I was not there, my father died. I will agree that you are my brother. I'm alone now. But you know we have culture, if you using wrong surname your life doesn't go right. If you doesn't steal, you will go mad or going in prison or doing wrong things every time.

JM: Are you saying to me – is this something you believe? Do you feel that the things that have been happening to you are because you're using the wrong surname?

SM: Yes. Because I'm not focussing on the right culture. Mkhize's culture and Duma's culture is different. Is not the same.

JM: In what way?

SM: If I remember my father, as Mkhize.

JM: Your stepfather.

SM: Yes. If he's my real father. I try to remember the surname from Mkhize. I was supposed to buy cow or chicken and killing inside the house. But Duma's family they kill cow in front of yard.

JM: Not inside the house?

SM: Not inside the house. If they kill inside the house one of us will die silently. Within six months one of us will be dead. One of the family.

JM: How do you know these things?

SM: I experienced that. But I'm not hundred percent sure. But if I'm going to the prophet, like sangoma, but some of them they're using water, some of them they're Roman Catholic, they have spirit to see what I doesn't see, one of them, which was the first time to me, I went to one of the mothers who is a prophet. She told me that when I looking your ancestors, they looking your family, they leaving you out. I don't know why. Mkhize's family. I started then to realise that what I heard when I was young from my mother that I'm not belonging to the Mkhize's family. All of

them their lives are going all right, you know.

JM: And Duma's life is also going alright. But because you are in the middle – you're not Mkhize –

SM: Everything I'm trying to do is fail. We call ancestors – we call that people who die – people who like children. They looking me if I'm walking. They want me to act as they act before. If I'm doing wrong things, first point: they will switch me lucky, until I'm going back to them, to tell them I'm going all right. I'm doing what you need. They not patient. Sometimes I will die.

JM: But now Sipho, how do you fit together this belief, your belief that the things that have happened to you – your schooling, your leg, going to prison – how do you fit that which you say is about your name – how do you fit that with the fact that you were so strongly involved in the politics and you were active? And that things that happened to you happened because of the politics not because of the name.

SM: Ja, that's true. But some guys I was working with, like this guy who died now –

JM: Gwala.

SM: Yes, with his firstborn and him before I went to prison, I was working with him, most of the people, some of them are member of parliament, you know. I understand my schooling is not good, but . . . how can I call it? That was happened to me even when my leg was cut.

JM: Where is your leg cut?

SM: Here. My leg is cut from here [indicates just below his knee]. Is artificial leg. Let's say I stay with you. There's help you need. If ancestors they want to show me something – you will – out of there without –

JM: Knowing why.

SM: But me – two leg I will find out of me. Even if you was the cause of that. We went to the court. You will go free of charge because there's no reason to destroy my life. That is my background fighting with me. I don't know how to explain it. Everything I'm doing – if I find wrong thing it's because I'm careless. That people they want make me feel like careless person, until I go back. I realise something.

JM: You're saying that there is a reason. Everything that happens to you there is a reason for that happening to you.

SM: There's no reason to happening to me. Even to be in prison, there's no need to be in prison, you know, I doesn't kill anyone, but I involve myself because I want to leave Bheki and Bhek'themba on that. Although I was a leader, I was the chairperson of that meeting.

JM: You were the chairperson of that meeting that was trying those three policemen [sic].

SM: Yes, to find proof. I kill decision.

JM: You?

SM: Yes. As chairperson.

JM: You took the decision.

SM: Yes. Okay I'm a killer already. But when I went to the court I doesn't find sentence as a commander, you know. I find sentence like I shoot someone, but I doesn't do that.

JM: You didn't shoot them.

SM: And on that time I was using crutches. I ask the judge how can I shoot a person with gun with crutches? Because of my ancestors they want me to find something

bad. I was supposed to be in prison, you know.

JM: Can I go back to that time? Were Bheki and Bhek'themba involved?

SM: Yes.

JM: Were they part of that committee?

SM: Yes, yes.

JM: Were they with you in the defence committee?

SM: Including the development committee. We were both on that committee. But I was the chairperson on that time. Bhek'themba was a marshal because the room was full. To ensure everything is going alright. And Bheki was acting as coordinator, because sometime we need witness same time. Bheki is supposed to make sure –

JM: That the person is there.

SM: Ja. And we find one of the guys bring my brother's shirt which have blood. Bheki was dealing with any information make us clear what was happen. All those things was going on my life. I don't want to say there's a reason. There's no reason. But in life, in space we living, there's a reason. But if I take a look it's not same with people I'm working with.

JM: But now – it's difficult to ask these questions, but I need to find out. If it's difficult for you to answer then you must say. You say you were not involved in the shooting of those three guys.

SM: Yes.

JM: Okay. Were Bheki and Bhek'themba?

SM: That's true.

JM: Okay.

SM: But if we went to the court, if I say I doesn't shoot anyone, who's shooting, that's the question the judge ask. I can't say Bheki. I put more sentence to them. Like comrades who was a witness later, they was afraid. They tell judge everything. And they tell judge the truth about me. What position I took at that time. But still I find sentence as a killer, although witness, five witness they say we doesn't see Sipho. We only see Sipho at meeting. After that we doesn't see him. And it was night. There's no street electricity. I using crutches.

JM: So that time you were on crutches.

SM: Yes.

JM: Was that because of the shooting that happened to you when you were outside that school?

SM: My stitches was painful that time.

JM: How long maybe from the time when you lost your leg to the time when this happened?

SM: Four months.

JM: But the interesting thing – and I remember Miss Macleod saying something to me – she said that you were shot in the foot. But where were you shot?

SM: Here [indicates his ankle].

JM: Why did they take your leg off up top there?

SM: Even to take it because –

JM: Why did they chop you?

SM: The bullet came right through. It doesn't touch the bones. The principal of Georgetown High School took me same time with guy who was with me. Same time. I will understand if I was try to duck around you know to avoid hospital.

JM: If the wound had got septic and gone bad.

SM: I doesn't agree with Edendale doctors. I went to the MediCity Hospital to prove that there's a need to cut my leg. I saw senior of the doctors at MediCity.

JM: When was this?

SM: When Edendale took decision to cut my leg. Before I sign. I went to MediCity to prove there's a purpose or not. He say, no, we supposed to cut your leg. Because poison is going up. I ask him what poison you talking about because I came here within an hour. All those things make me believe, you know, that there's something behind I doesn't see it. If I doesn't believe in God, God doesn't do nothing for me. And God doesn't take me as a person who has sinned, who doing wrong things. Because God understand that person doesn't know me. He's doing everything. If I told myself I know God is alive, if I doing wrong thing he will charge me. He will hit me because I wrong him. But I'm doing wrong things.

JM: Did you go to church when you were a young boy? Where does your belief in God come from? Is it from your mother? From your family?

SM: I realise when I was looking everything I take my two ancestors as a messenger, as an angel. In fact, I hid something from God. But God is too big and too high to [indistinct] with him. But our family who die, if they was doing good things in life, they are angel, they send a message to me and to God.

JM: I've also thought of the same thing. Because I have Zulu friends who believe in the ancestors, and for me that is how I understand the ancestors. Because even in the Roman Catholic Church they have this idea of the saints. And the saints are good people who died, but they are still alive. And so when you pray you don't pray to God, you pray through the saints and then the saints will communicate with God and help you. And it's the same thing I understand where you are talking with the ancestors. The ancestors are like a messenger that goes to God and brings the message back to you. Because you can communicate with the ancestors but you can't communicate with God.

SM: But that agreement I have with my father for example, if I was with him like that, that, my son, our culture is one two three, if he died, if he focus on me to continue with culture that he give me as a lesson, if I doesn't do that he won't send my messages from God. He will bring bad things to me.

JM: Do you think that's what happened? Do you think it was your father that was causing the bad things to happen?

SM: Yes. And Mkhize's family, you know, if women have children out of marriage, he's supposed to have cow or chicken. To ask permission to Mkhize's family that I have son from Duma to your home. Please accept him. I need him to grow like your children, because I can't throw him anywhere. Everything will be alright like Mkhize's family if my mother doing that culture for the first time. She didn't do that. And Mkhize's ancestors they won't allow me, because they doesn't know me before. They look me like visitor to the Mkhize family, they look me like visitor. They won't protect me. Even now I'm going back to Duma's family. I supposed – that man who live a life now [Ntshebe] he's supposed to have something going to the corner, leaving [indistinct] everything, tell his father I find your son.

JM: When you say – What does he have? An ukhamba, a small ukhamba, in a small dark corner and then he puts some beer . . .

SM: That chicken or cow. That he supposed to put it here.
 JM: For his father.
 SM: For his father. He grant a permission to welcome me at home. To look at me like him. He's supposed to tell them the truth. That, my father, you did wrong, you doesn't show us your son. Now we see your son. If it's not your son, you the only person who have true, that is your son or not, you supposed to doing anything to show us. If his life is going alright we will see. If his life is going same we will see something. But sometimes –
 JM: I am learning so much. I hope you don't mind talking like this.
 SM: No, no. If I concentrate strongly to the ancestors I won't do nothing in life. I will put my hand like this [shows]. I'm waiting to them. But I help me. From that I'm being doing on that time. They won't bring money to me. If I'm going to find some job they will help me.
 JM: But you must go and do that. You must act.
 SM: If my life is going alright, sometimes I won't believe even to God. If I win a lotto today I won't believe in God. Because sometimes we believe in God because we need a right, a great life. If I have money what I need to go the church? Because I have money. Money is the church, God, ancestors, everything. Even God sometimes he wants me to realise him. Sometimes he knows I doesn't realise exactly. Even God is showing something to make you believe him.

[END OF SIDE A]

SM: I was afraid even now, maybe prison is sounding next to me. According our culture if you are going to the van, you avoid lucky.
 JM: What do you mean if you going to the van? What van? The police van?
 SM: The police van, yes. If you get inside you supposed to clean yourself.
 JM: After?
 SM: After. Because if you doesn't do that, it's easy to going again. But I believe that is another point to believe that my life from ancestors is not going alright. At the same time about one o'clock when I'm going to at home my mother say you leave your friend here you are going to drink. She doesn't want to understand. She was thought I have money. I understand her. She's too old now. Seventy-five years.
 JM: Miss Macleod said that your mother and her knew each other. How did your mother and her know each other?
 SM: Miss Macleod she knows my grandmother. She was a teacher at Girls High School, Miss Macleod, and my grandmother –
 JM: She worked there.
 SM: My mother was too young at that time, living here in town. There's that contact from my granny, and as we grow, we grow we saw Miss Macleod when she was too young at that time.
 JM: So she's known you from when you were a small boy?
 SM: Yes. But when we were in prison Miss Macleod help my mother. Although we was doing politics, everything, which doesn't bring something, but we make sure that time we find some job, we bring something at home. My mother was alone with two of Bheki's children. And two of my sister who died. Trying to help my mother

to live a life, you know. Until my mother have sixty-five years she's trying to organise pension to her. When my mother have pension she starting to drink.

JM: Where did your mother work before to get the pension?

SM: She was working to Miss Macleod. But not really working. Miss Macleod she's doing everything . . . Ja, my mother. I blame her. She make my life fail. From at school. When my sister died I was with my mother, you know. My sister's child was two months old. My sister's child now is doing standard nine. I supposed to live with this child. My mother is going to drink. Maybe will be come back about two o' clock late. Doing everything to trying to help this child. When I'm go back to school they say you have three weeks without school. I'm doing first year that time. They say you supposed to carry a letter from your mother to ensure that you was at home. I told my mother. She say, yes, I will give that. Monday my mother is drunk. I was not serious about school that time.

JM: You say you have standard eight?

SM: No. I stay at first year. I doesn't finish first year. In fact when I remember I doing six months. I doesn't finish grade one.

JM: Is that all you've got?

SM: Yes, I doesn't even finish.

JM: You don't have more than grade one?

SM: No.

JM: That's strange. What did you do then?

SM: I learnt to write Zulu when I was in prison.

JM: I was going to ask you how did you learn to read and write?

SM: When I was in prison, I saw Bhek'themba. Bhek'themba told me this is 'i', this is 'm', this is 'j', this is 's'. I was starting to write Sipho.

JM: You didn't know how to write your own name?

SM: Yes. Even my surname. Later. Even signature. I say Bhek'themba this signature is alright? He say, no, this signature supposed to be making from your surname and name. Because sometimes it's compulsory to make a signature instead of writing name and surname. In prison they doesn't allow me to go to school. They say you are D. group. You can't go to school.

JM: First time when you came in?

SM: First time when I came in. They tried, Bhek'themba and Bheki to make me read – I'm starting to wrote poetry by myself.

JM: That's unbelievable. Is this your writing? Where did you get this typewriter?

SM: Miss Macleod buy it for me. [Indistinct.]

JM: So you learnt to write in prison?

SM: Yes.

JM: How did you become involved in the politics and . . . did you not need to read and write?

SM: I find that problem, but every time Bhek'themba is next to me. If I supposed to read, Bhek'themba read for me. I will use each and every word to ask Bhek'themba. What's the meaning of this name? Bhek'themba told me, although even himself he's not enough, but at the same time he will learn because he say no let's go to the dictionary. For the first time Miss Macleod came in prison.

JM: When was that?

SM: It was 1991, March. She want to talk with me. But Bhek'themba was interpreter.

Sometimes Bheki. But later she can't believe that I'm trying now. I'm trying to talk with her. I'm trying even to read English. I use my understanding. Although sometimes I have problem, but now I understand story in English.

JM: And English newspapers?

SM: Ja.

JM: In a way then going to prison was an opportunity for you to read and write which you never had that opportunity before.

SM: That's why I was crying for the first time, I say I want to go to school.

JM: When you were inside?

SM: Yes. They say no.

JM: Did they let you go?

SM: No.

JM: When I met you you were in A. group?

SM: Yes. We stay at school because of drama and poetry.

JM: Because you were writing drama and poetry?

SM: And dealing with prisoners to giving them lessons. But some place to stay gangsters they don't allow prisoners to give some prisoners lessons. But if you have something you want to do to help prison about rehabilitation, sometimes you have gone outside, you want to bring it inside to give prisoners a play, you have that opportunity. They say you guys are supposed to stay at school.

JM: So that whole section – That was G-block.

SM: G-block yes.

JM: So was G-block the education section?

SM: Yes. Most of the guys who were there were dealing with Damelin. But my class is too low. I supposed to starting down. But prison authorities they fail. We make a list every time. Sometimes they will find teacher who is in prison. After one month, they send him with draft. Prison authority they don't want to have teacher from first year. Until standard ten. After that you will work with Damelin or any private school. Prison authority they are dealing with private schools, from standard six to

–

JM: Not below that?

SM: Not below that. And I'm trying to contact some prisoners who have . . . like Bhek'themba. Bhek'themba he . . . Because I was not alone in prison who doesn't go to school, who want that opportunity. But sometimes they won't allow Bhek'themba. Because it was me first who was A-group. Bhek'themba and Bheki they coming later.

JM: But then were you separate?

SM: But we were stay together. We stay together. It was a culture to the prison authority that those guys they living together. We will find some productions to them if they together. And we make sure every year we supposed to have production.

JM: Plays? You doing plays inside?

SM: Yes.

JM: Plays about?

SM: Crime. Aids awareness. We dealing with crime and Aids awareness. Like poetry. Dealing with those things. But we find a problem sometimes when we going to Waterval. Because we were writing in *Echo* they send us to Waterval. At Waterval

I was writing and put it to the newspaper. I think it was *Umafrika*. They send me to Durban-Westville. I doesn't see to my file. They make a report, New Prison authority, that you supposed to be aware this guy, he want to look bad things, tell people outside. I doesn't know that. When I was writing I saw prisoners stabbing each other in front of prison warder. I wrote for that newspaper, because I'm sure people who stay there they will buy it. If they saw that newspaper they say guy you see this thing we find a report from New Prison that this is your life, go to the Westville. I went to the Westville Prison. I make hunger strike there. They send me to the New Prison.

JM: When did you first write in *Echo*? Because I must look for these articles. Do you have any of those articles?

SM: I supposed to make an apology. I promised last week, because I went there at Hammarsdale. I have more than four.

JM: By your house?

SM: Yes. Even more than ten I will fail to have from *Echo*. Including poetry and articles.

JM: Because I'd like to see those. You say you've got some at home, but you don't have all of them?

SM: Yes.

JM: Because I can look for them in *Echo*. But I need to know when. What year do you think?

SM: We busy from ninety-four . . . Ja, ninety-three, ninety-four, ninety-five. About three years. But Bhek'themba will remind me.

JM: And then you also said there was an article in *The Natal Witness* about Harry Gwala and you guys, when you were sentenced. I haven't got that one. That one you say is ninety-three. Before June or after June.

SM: '93 March. And the day . . . But I have day at home.

JM: Have you got a copy of it?

SM: I haven't got copy, but I have the date. '93 March. And when Reggie Hadebe – shooting at . . . he was coming to the meeting with IFP, I don't know what that place. We write to *The Natal Witness* to encourage him as a peacemaker. Sometimes there are few leaders to the ANC who was like Reggie Hadebe. He was a peacemaker. We try to encourage him, but finally within two weeks he died. We was believe on him when we was inside. There was violence at that time. We are living in that violence. But we was not feeling happy. We need leaders who are trying to make this thing stop. We starting there to writing strong about politics to the *Echo*, but make sure –

JM: You were still inside then?

SM: Still inside then.

JM: So you were inside when Reggie was killed?

SM: Yes.

JM: Did you get newspapers inside the prison? Did they allow you to get newspapers? Or how did you find the newspapers?

SM: I find the newspapers if I have my friend who a warder. Sometimes I give the warder R5. I say keep the change. And he buy it for me. Later if you an A. on the visit.

JM: Visitors can bring you a newspaper?

SM: Yes.

JM: But there were no newspapers available in the library of the prison?

SM: Old ones. Yes. And you supposed to read inside. Sometimes you have a few hours.
[Pause.]

JM: I'd like to see those articles. Please. Next time. And there was also that other thing which Bhek'themba said he would translate. That thing that you gave Bhek'themba. Was it in your diary or something?

SM: Yes, in my diary. It was one of the ladies stay in Dambuza.

JM: Oh, that letter!

SM: She stay in Dambuza when we was in prison. I was afraid because she was talking things which was behind, that what committee we was dealing with each, what our aims, you know. Private things, but she was publish that thing. But I say, no, this is fact. Although it's hard, it's fact, you know. Even numbers of people who was on the meeting. That lady is trying . . . she was there. Even myself I don't know her face.

JM: You don't know her?

SM: I only know her name and surname. We starting from eighty-six to keep stories what was happening. Now life in Dambuza is going back when we in prison. In fact when we was outside we are dealing with crime. To the violence, or to the struggle . . . there's not . . . not all violence was in politics. Some violence was have a chance – there's some people have a chance to violate people.

JM: Doing crime.

SM: Yes, Some of them doing rape. Like if I'm blowing a whistle, if you make that sometimes you are playing. Nine o'clock tonight all people in that area will going to the hall. That's an alarm, or message that IFP is near to us. If you heard that to your ears, even if you sleep, wake up, leave everything, and go to the hall to have a meeting with leaders. How children will be safe. Everything is alright. But sometimes gangsters – maybe at about twelve o'clock –

JM: And everybody goes to the hall?

SM: Go to the hall –

JM: The gangsters come and they steal from the houses?

SM: They steal from the houses. You know, as a people in the defence committee, you know, not only to defend ANC to other organisations, to defend people –

JM: From the gangsters

SM: From the gangsters. We supposed to take decision to find out that people, that make life not easy. Sometimes my neighbour who did that. If we took my neighbour to the meeting – Okay, that lady mention that. We doesn't allow people to go to the court. We try to go to court, police – doesn't work. We solve ourself our problem.

JM: Your own court.

SM: Yes.

JM: Your own laws.

SM: Yes. She mention – that's why I say it's a hard thing on that. Sometimes we were careless, because we have stronger decision. But sometimes we make people know we don't want crime. Not because we fighting for freedom we supposed to destroy everything. We need good life. We need to live as a people. Maybe some of that people who steal that things they are leaders, we supposed to show fair to the

community. Sometimes we use *invubu*.

JM: Whip.

SM: Yes. Sometimes we supposed to go to Mr Zondi's yard to making cleaning. Or making garden. Or flowers. If things you did is not hard. Sometimes even –

END OF TAPE.

INTERVIEW No. 4.

INTERVIEW BETWEEN JACOBUS MOOLMAN (JM), BHEK'THEMBA MBHELE (BM)
AND SIPHO MKHIZE (SM)

DATE: 5 October 2002

VENUE: Office of Jacobus Moolman in the Tatham Art Gallery

- SM: I use Colgate to keep these [press clippings stuck onto a piece of cardboard] things.
JM: You use Colgate like glue?
SM: Yes.
JM: Colgate toothpaste?
SM: When I was in prison – but I hope you will make copies.
JM: I will make a copy of this.
SM: I wrote this, but I was in prison. It is talking about –
JM: One, two, three, four, five. Five articles. This is very interesting.
SM: This is one of the MK soldiers. But at the end of his life . . . He was a MK soldier.
But when – It was 1994, when the armies come together – But this guy was
starting to make robbery.
JM: Who was he?
SM: S'bu Mkhize. I was believe on him, but . . .
JM: Did you know him?
SM: But before he went to exile.
JM: When you say you believed in him?
SM: The way his mind, his skill – you know, he was take wrong position to be a soldier.
JM: Could you not say that you were also a soldier?
SM: Yes. Right inside, but I doesn't go into exile, you know. He achieve a lot, but at the
end of the day . . .
JM: Did he die?
SM: Yes. By the police. He was doing murder and robbery. About this one [another
article] I was encouraging *Echo*. I was encouraging *Echo* – Naleni. Echo in Zulu
means Naleni. I use the name Echo. I wrote in Zulu.
JM: Were you at Sevontein?
SM: Yes.
JM: So those were all done at Sevontein?
SM: This one – Bhek'themba was supposed to do that job. One of the lady when we
was in prison was trying to keep our community focussed on what we have been
doing before in life, she mention everything we have been doing from –
JM: Was this that story you told, of that lady who wrote –
SM: Yes.
JM: Thembi Maphanga. [Indistinct.] Those are interesting, Sipho. Those would be very
interesting.
SM: But I hope it's good if you find in the library copies of these.
JM: No, what I will do I will make copies now upstairs, because then I've got all the
dates, and then I will go look in the *Echo*.

SM: This poem I publish on *Echo*, I still feel it that I was trying to create peace. It's talking about peace, that if you are angry with someone how life end. What you achieve end of the day.

JM: Have you got this part [another part of the article]?

SM: I lost this part.

JM: When I find this one I will give it to you. Are these all from *Echo*?

SM: Yes.

JM: But now, Sipho, you don't have dates. You don't know when. Can you think?

SM: When I went to Sevontein . . . I went there two times. Oh, we made this . . .

JM: What year, can you think?

SM: I'm trying to remind myself. We were complaining about – including Gwala [Siphiwe Gwala] when he was working at New Prison. One prisoner died at New Prison. That guy died because of HIV. But we blame Gwala as a leader at the hospital. He failed. He was failed to save that life. If you are inside in prison, if there is a proof that you are HIV positive, you supposed to have parole. You supposed to go out free of charge. You know, you supposed to eat vegetables, special food, but at prison they can't provide you about something, but if hospital see that prisoner he suffering about HIV and Aids they supposed to grant to the head office of Correctional Service that we have people who HIV positive. Now they trying to estimate sometimes you have twelve months left to die. Before he dies he's supposed to go to his family. But Mr Gwala failed. We wrote this on *Echo*. That guy who died he was an ANC activist. Beside that, we take him as a comrade.

[Bhek'themba Mbhele arrives]

JM: We've just been talking about these [articles]. These are some things that Sipho brought. Do you remember those?

BM: Yes. I've got another article here. It's our first one.

JM: When you were still awaiting trial. You hadn't been sentenced. 'Don't give up Reggie Hadebe'. Was this in *Echo* also?

BM: It was in *Echo*.

SM: No. It was *The Witness*.

JM: Maybe *The Witness* – [Break to order food.] Sipho was just talking to me about an article you guys had written for a friend of yours who died when he was ill. He had Aids inside.

BM: I still remember this article. It was about our friend who died because . . . I don't know. People do not want to reveal their status. But according to my understanding I have noticed something like HIV Aids victims. But I can't say he died because of Aids. Here we were trying to remember him and to remind people. He was our comrade. Our co-actor. He was a member of the cast.

SM: I hope you remember this one. In *Fidelities*. [Indistinct.]

BM: Ja , this is very encouraging, very encouraging. It encourage us to keep it up. To pull up our socks. This one is very encouraging.

SM: And it play a very important role that time. We told ourselves that we are men outside.

JM: This is an interesting poem. You say here: 'When I close my eyes every night I

twist and turn / When I try to memorize you face / I've got to let you know what happened.' Are you talking to somebody?

SM: Yes.

JM: Do you know who this person is? Is it a real person? Or is it somebody in your imagination?

SM: In my imagination. Although I face some problems, lot of people was forget us, lot of people was thought we died. When judge give us sentence, most of people doesn't believe they will see us. But especially to the women, I was fall in love with another girl.

JM: Before you went inside?

SM: Yes. When I went inside I heard some rumours, even letters. They encouraging in the first letters, they . . . I saw that letter not the same as this one. After a year, I saw the different letters, she's going down. After three years she's gone.

JM: Sorry.

SM: Ja. But at that time I wrote strong poem.

JM: So you had her in your mind when you were writing this, but it also –

SM: And it was not only her. When you are going to the visit, maybe we are sixty in the one cell, my neighbour next to my bed, when he comes to the visit, he come and relax, you know, everything, as usual I supposed to ask, why, maybe someone in your family die. He said no-one died. But I lost my wife. Same story if you stay in prison two or three years, you know. But you have the same story. But it was good to me because I was not married. Most of people, some of them they old enough to marry again. You know. He believe in his wife. Sometime he have five children, but have sentence for ten years. Wife outside she will stay house, car, change position. That person inside sometime he join gangsters or drinking too much or smoking trying to accept. Even in front of law he hasn't got powers. Bhek'themba was acting as prisoners' secretary. Because we used to write every time. Prisoners they ask, why every time guys you are writing something? We say, no, it including poem, short story, drama. Some of people cough out, they say, hey, I lost my girlfriend, would you write a letter including poem, you know, I want to encourage her. We think with Bhek'themba, we try to write special poem, we trying to hear his [the other prisoner's] story.

JM: Did you do that Bhek'themba?

BM: I was acting as a secretary.

SM: Sometimes he [another prisoner] want to make an appeal.

JM: Because I've seen in quite a lot of the letters and the poems that it's your handwriting.

BM: Ja, I was acting as a secretary. But not self-appointed. I was appointed by the people. 'I think you must face this task, to write, to act, to regard yourself as a secretary. Because we want you to write something whatever, whatever.' I don't know, maybe Sipho will tell you it's because of my handwriting, I don't know. But as far as I see my handwriting is not good enough.

SM: No, your handwriting is clear.

JM: But is it also because of your ability to write?

BM: I think so.

JM: We must look at that. It's not just handwriting.

SM: Most of all, he was patient. You know, if you say I want you to wrote a letter to

my girlfriend, it's not easy to take a ballpen and write something for someone. Sometimes we help him, no, let's put that words, she'll understand you know, like that. But Bhek'themba doesn't do only for us. To the prisoners, you know, some of prisoners they crying that, ai, I have ten year sentence, but I can't believe. I only steal a small thing, you know. I want to make an appeal. Bhek'themba used to write for prisoners. Some of them they out now. We saw them now.

BM: I was a bush lawyer.

JM: But now a couple of things I must ask you around that. Was there some kind of payment that you got? Writing the letters, did they maybe give you cigarettes or food or . . . ?

BM: No, not even a stick of matches. It was my borrowed time. It was a borrowed time. It was my sympathy. Because if you address your problem, I have very sympathy.

JM: And then you put some poetry in with that also? That you wrote? Or that the three of you wrote?

SM: Sometimes the three of us. But if they together with that person who writing for him Bhek'themba will come back, guys, let's look at library, you know, I have one guy who want poems for fall in love, we look at our library, we say, no, this is good for him.

JM: When you mean your library, is it the library of poems you have already written?

SM: Yes.

JM: Of all the poems that you kept in the cell?

SM: Yes.

JM: In your library there in the cell?

BM: Our small library. We call it a library.

SM: A piece of paper – even reading drama – if we find some stories we keep it.

BM: Ja, you know, you gave me a ballpen. Even, some time we talk with the media, we see you as a very important role in our lives because you gave us something which is very very rare. Ink. It costs money.

JM: I'm interested more in this idea of your role as secretary. I want to ask you – I know I've asked you before, but I . . . my memory's not so good. What schooling did you have?

BM: Standard eight.

JM: You finished standard eight?

BM: Ja.

JM: What subjects did you do?

BM: English, isiZulu. But what I must say is this, I must be specific, in languages I was too good. But Afrikaans, unfortunately –

[End side B]

SM: Like if you remember that poem I wrote, it was the first time when you put to the *Fidelities*, when I say I won't forget 1993 December 20. Even now I won't forget 1993 December 20, when prisoners was stab each other. But that was careless mistake of prison warder. They put different gangsters to the passage together without light. I remember even the surname of that old man who died

that day. We were dancing on the blood. From the fourth floor to the first floor. I feel pain if I remember that day. But it's a lesson to the young people who fit enough to go in prison. That you will face something, you know . . . But we are focussing, if I'm doing crime, I will say no they will give me food, bed, everything. But sometimes I will die inside. Because of the carelessness of warders.

JM: It's this area I'm trying actually to investigate. To try and find out what is the power of poetry. That's what I'm interested in seeing. What power does poetry have in a situation where the people who are writing it do not have power? Because you inside, you do not have power. Other people have power on you. They take you, they put you there. They take you, they put you that side. So you in a situation where you have no power. But still in that situation you are making poetry. And maybe in the making of poetry you are finding a power for yourself, that you do not have because of the situation. That's the situation that I'm trying to understand. That I want to write about in my research.

SM: But maybe you notice one thing – most of the poetry, when we are writing, we are writing in prison, we are crying, different ways, you know. Sometimes I pretend a day I remember my girlfriend, but inside the prison I can't see even one thing make me laugh. But I supposed to take that position if I say I making a poetry now, you know, I want people who read that poetry – I need that people to laugh.

JM: It's maybe almost like you're acting? It's like you're acting in your poem. Because you can't laugh, but you must act like you can laugh. That somebody who reads it can laugh.

SM: But he is surprised when he see that, oh, he was in prison, but when I take a look to the poem he look like he was to the five-star hotel. But we say no guys, every time we wrote to the *Echo*, or different newspaper, we supposed to pretend that guys, you know. We started to – if they have function, we go to that function, we say we want to put our poem, we need you to put us to the items.

JM: But then you can't write serious stuff for those functions.

SM: No, it's serious. If it's Aids awareness. We wrote a poetry concentrate to the Aids. Sometimes it's crime awareness, you know.

JM: But can you speak about your heart?

SM: Yes. I'm not supposed to be here. But I agree, I will finish my sentence. At the same time it's a lesson to the prisoners who is there, behave. But sometimes I have two lines, strong ones, to the prison warders. They say, ay!

BM: Ja, if I remember, I remember one day when it was Human Rights Day at Sevontein prison. Siphon did recite his poem, that one in New Prison, he did recite that poem. All of them were interested in the prison, in what was happening, is it true the corruption? Trying to pretend us? And they were involved in that thing. He recite it. He recite it. But that poem it is criticizing the whole of the prison members. But he did recite it. Just to face the truth. So poems have a very important role in life because even if there is a misunderstanding between you and your girlfriend or your wife you used to write it and beg down on your knees and beg her, I've got your gift here, just read it, it's a poem. Even at the funeral just to say goodbye to your friend. Please, can you give me a platform to recite this poem for my friend, to say goodbye, farewell. A poem is a very important thing.

Even in prison, I'm trying to give you a little picture, that even in prison, to reveal all the situation that is happening in prison – that was because of a poem.

END.

INTERVIEW No. 5.

INTERVIEW BETWEEN JACOBUS MOOLMAN (JM), SIPHO MKHIZE (SM) AND
BHEK'THEMBA MBHELE (BM)

DATE: 26 October 2002.

VENUE: Office of Jacobus Moolman in the Tatham Art Gallery

JM: You know, I haven't contacted anybody else. I haven't been able to find anybody else. I haven't tried very hard, I must be honest. I haven't tried very hard.

BM: Ja, there's no problem to only consider me and Sipho and Bheki. There's no problem.

SM: Ja, but if you want to contact some of them we'll try by all means, you know, to make some co-operation. Although it's not easy.

JM: I know. You said the one guy's gone to Hammarsdale. Didn't he go to Hammarsdale?

SM: Who?

JM: Themba.

BM: Vilakazi.

SM: Vilakazi's from Durban. From KwaMashu.

BM: You know Themba Vilakazi's living – I don't know what I can put this – like a nomadic life. Moving from one place to another place. You cannot understand his address. You cannot understand his address. Maybe he's changed now. He's at Transkei. Even his nation cannot understand him – what kind of tribe is this man.

SM: Xhosa, Siswati –

JM: Not Zulu?

SM: Zulu, coloured.

BM: You cannot trust this man. So you cannot find out about him, but according to the prison computer maybe you can find all of them. But what I'm sure about is Bheki. It's easy to contact Bheki. Even ourselves we are in contact with Bheki. Even ourselves, the co-operation between you and me is the contact. So it's not complicated.

JM: I'm not worried about Bheki. That's easy. I was thinking maybe of waiting until he comes out. Or do you think I should even start while he's inside? Go and see him?

SM: Even that is alright. But you know better than us how you job survive.

BM: This research is a process to you.

JM: You right. It is a process. It is a long process. I don't want to make it very long. I've been doing a lot of reading now. And there are many people in South Africa who've written books about their experiences inside. But you've got something unique. Very unique.

BM: That's a very good idea. You know the [Indistinct]. Go for it. And we will also back you, there and there. It's a very good –

SM: It's a blessing to us. We pray for you. Because we pray for such a long time to

deal with art, to concentrate to the writing. But our background is a part of destroying our talent. The life we are living it. But you make us, you put more courage [Indistinct] to us, even if we stay, we say no, we supposed to be dealing with another [Indistinct]. Because of you, you know. We find something stronger.

BM: You inspire us.

SM: That's why I believe it will go well. I believe on that.

JM: Bhhek'themba, you were saying that you had –

BM: Yes, I have some poems that I want you guys to talk about. Especially, like, when we talking about what we have done inside the prison, we forgot – last of last week – we forgot a very important point that we have been granted a permission to the prison authorities to write a poem. Legal. Authorised by the prison authorities. We have granted that to Mr du Plessis. He was the head –

SM: He was one of the managers. Dealing with Correctional Services marketing.

JM: So you had to write him a letter?

SM: Yes.

BM: We write him a letter that, ay, we've got some good poems here we want to hand it over to the publishers so that we can gain our book, our poetry book. He said no I must take this to the constitution –

SM: The Constitution of the Correctional Services doesn't allow prisoners to wrote a book or poetry, anything –

BM: Even to get inside with a small computer, you as my friend you are not allowed to get inside with a computer to record what was happening inside, information inside the prison. So it was a struggle. It was a struggle. Part of the struggle because we stood up and told them we want to talk to them straight.

JM: Now what do you mean? You were saying to them that you wanted to get permission to write inside?

SM: To publish!

JM: More than writing. More than just writing.

BM: Yes.

JM: You wanted to get the permission to take what you were writing inside and find a publisher.

BM: Find a publisher.

JM: One question. Were you allowed to write inside? Even the first step. Were you allowed to write?

BM: We were not allowed to write. In that letter [Mentioned above] we also include to allow us to write. Because we've got a good skills to write.

SM: Before we grant that permission to call us as a writer, Mr du Plessis he call us, they show us a copy of *The Natal Witness*. We writing about prison warders, we say they don't have concentration, they not straight, they stereotype, you know. Even if there's a problem they looking on the same way of things. We publish in *The Natal Witness*. They called us to Mr du Plessis. He charged us. Maybe, sometimes, I'm not sure we lost a month each and every sentence of us. Because we wrote to *The Natal Witness* complaining about prison warders. After that, we say, no, publish, they don't allow like to have a book. Let's grant that permission. Because we can't live without writing. We make application. We say we need to have that permission. Not only for us, although that time, after you, we running

workshops trying to mobilize prisoners to write poetry, you know, and drama. They allow us. I wrote a poem. We say we supposed to give Mr Kobus that what will make us happy. Mr du Plessis call us. He tell us that we allow you, not only you guys, each and every prisoners to write a poetry, short stories, to publish legally right inside. We say no thanks, do you give us the right to tell the prisoners? He say no. We won't tell all the prisoners.

BM: You only the writers. But we are not sure about that. Let us tell other ones. Tell them that you are allowed now to write a poems. He say no, no, we can't allow that.

SM: What was positive to us, that was the first step find something good to make us feel alright in prison.

JM: So you got the permission?

BM: Yes.

JM: And you were able to send to *Echo* and to other places?

SM: Although I don't know how much struggle you find when you publish us in *Fidelities* . . . Let's say I am in New Prison – sometime it was one and a half year – I went to Westville, I find some friends who are dealing with something, you know . . .

BM: [Referring to various articles] Ja, here we remember about the first meeting with the white prison authorities. Here we were complaining about – maybe we were four months into our sentence, if I'm not mistaken. So here we were complaining about the bloodshed in prison. We sat down with them and asked them good strategies to stop this bloodshed. But unfortunately the strategy that we have it was not good to them. But at the end of the day – it was December 1 – they postponed our meeting. They postponed our meeting to the next coming Friday. The next coming Friday to us it was a draft or a transfer to Waterval. They took us by the transfer –

JM: So then you didn't have the meeting?

BM: We didn't have the conclusion of our meeting. So it was another strategy to defuse our struggle. To take us to Waterval.

JM: When you say the bloodshed in the prison. Talk to me about that. What do you mean by that? What are the causes of the bloodshed? What kind? What do you mean?

BM: The bloodshed. It was the bloodshed between the prisoners themselves.

JM: Gangs?

BM: Gangs. And also . . . They were stabbing each other. But according to our ideas and observance we thought that even the prison warders are involved in this bloodshed, even though they are not fully involved, but they are behind this, because as Sipho said before that they were supplying the knives, some of them they smuggle the knife. Because, you know, we are in the same township, so it is easy to say, 'Ay smuggle the knife. We are growing together. We sympathise with you.' So they were behind the bloodshed. That's why we decided to sit down with the prison authorities and convey that. But they promised to conclude everything at the next coming Friday. At the next coming Friday they take us Waterval.

SM: And now that proposal is on now at New Prison. We say, it's better sometimes bloodshed not going on if we have knives, spoons and dishes, plastic spoon and

dishes. That kind of knife [indicates] is an instrument of government, even dishes like this, spoon [indicates] it's too strong. Prisoners they use that kind of spoon to stab each other. We supposed to change. We have plastic. Now they exercise that.

JM: Was that one of your suggestions?

SM: Yes.

JM: To them. At your first meeting? That you replace the metal spoons with plastic spoons.

SM: To ensure that we avoid bloodshed.

JM: And they wouldn't accept that?

SM: Although they find some points, but they say at the end of the day when have the last meeting, we send them to Waterval.

JM: But now you say they're thinking about doing this.

SM: Yes . . . And when we went to Waterval we say no, they send us to Waterval because gangsters dominate at Waterval Prison. More than any other prison.

JM: Really?

SM: Ja, they're dominating. We went to Waterval. We went to reception. We say no guys, we were two or three, Bheki was not there. We say no guys we supposed to start struggle here. We need place for people who doesn't involve themselves to the gangsters. We need a place for Christians. You know, to enjoy their rights to be Christians. We need place for guerrillas, for soldiers, for people who was involved to the struggle before, who is in prison, political prisoners. To continue with workshop that, guys, the struggle outside is finished. We supposed to go there. We supposed to change. It's not easy to change when I'm here. I'm supposed to start inside first to change. We fight to have a place for anti-gangsters.

JM: When you mean a place what do you mean?

BM: Our section or our cell.

SM: Our cell . . . Each and every cell we are sixty.

JM: Sixty?

BM: Sixty prisoners.

SM: We deal with that, ja, ja.

BM: But it was a struggle. It was a struggle. Because we used to go to the prison officials and say we need our safety place from these gangsters, in order to avoid their influence. So it is better to accommodate us, those who are all focussing on what is happening outside, just forget about the gangsters.

JM: They were almost encouraging you to become victims of the gangs, by not taking action –

BM: Ja, they were not taking any action. But at the end of the day they just gave us a hall, like a hall, it's too long . . . Do you still remember the 1994 vote campaign in the prisons?

JM: Oh, yes.

BM: We were also involved in that campaign . . . Because even the government of the day announced that only the prisoners are not allowed to vote. How can I say that? Because this is the free election, the first free election. They must involve that. So just tell the prisoners to struggle about that. Unfortunately, the gangsters were negative about our point. Even the prison authorities they were also

negative. They thought we wanted to make their premises uncontrollable, we want to spread the violence, to take our violence outside and put it here in their prisons. The gangsters they thought maybe we can just defend those who are exploited by them, to take their money, it's not easy now to take the money because there are other prisoners, so we just take their rights now, but we didn't get discouraged. We were encouraging each other and continuing with the struggle.

SM: At the end of the day we went on a hunger strike.

BM: Ja, at the end of the day we went on a hunger strike.

SM: To demand that we have our place, you know. And they wanted to destroy that gangsters. And we have strategy as prisoners. We need a small table to sit down with the prison authorities to share views, you know. Because we have more information, more than them. But most of the prison authorities they have lost hope. They say, you want to create happiness in prison. There's no gentlemen in prison. You can't do that. I'm working here for such a long time, more than thirty years, you can't create gentlemen here. It's their life, they're eating blood. They're pigs.

JM: Let them live like animals.

BM: Let them live in the mud.

SM: But in ten people, two people don't lose their belief that they're going to start life again. We say no, we went to hunger strike.

JM: How long – ?

SM: Those were hard times!

JM: What do you mean?

BM: It was a thirty day hunger strike.

SM: Thirty days.

JM: Thirty days?

SM: Ja. We went to thirty days there were three. The first day we were forty something.

BM: Forty something on the first day.

SM: But at the end of the day we were three . . . Even me too, I have my [indistinct]. Say if you make a hunger strike the prison authority they want to make sure that sometimes you are looking there you are eating, you know, but they say we want to keep you alone, because you are starting hunger strike. We'll take some of your – not rights – your privileges, because you are against the law. We are putting you in a single cell, we are looking you, we are putting you every day to the doctor to ensure that you doesn't eat. Because we are reporting at the head office that we have prisoner who doesn't eat. We went to the doctor every day. To see that they doesn't eat, all of them.

BM: They didn't eat yesterday.

SM: When we went to the doctor some of our . . . we call comrades – although we neutral – they are going, they say they are hungry, they say we going to die, even me too. The prison authority, they have strategy to break everything if you are a prisoner, they thought even your money is like this, each and every cell is opened, they put nice food in front of you. 'I say, ay, I hungry. I want to take that piece of chicken.' But I look at Bhek'themba, he doesn't take it. I say no . . . They want to make proof to the media if you die, we give them food, it's their

business. But we won, after that case, they say guys this is your cell –

BM: Take everyone that doesn't want gangsters to sleep together.

JM: So they gave you a cell?

BM: A long cell.

SM: But we can't stay as an Mkhize family. We stay with prisoners who are against bloodshed in prison. We took those guys – IFP, ANC – you know, different backgrounds. We say guys, no, we supposed to put influence to these guys, that some of them maybe are pulling balaclavas, they want to overthrow our struggle from inside. We say we are running different classes. We have political class.

JM: Political class?

SM: General. Not concentrating to some organisation, political organisation.

JM: Not about party politics? About ANC or IFP.

BM: Discussing about our country, what make us to be here. So what about to change your life. You are going out.

SM: What politics is.

BM: What politics is.

SM: How politics use us. How we get into the politics.

BM: How can I obey this new government? How can I pay attention to this new government?

SM: Even to the colours. How you will accept another colour?

BM: Political tolerance, you know, in organisations. Especially IFP and ANC.

JM: Was there conflict between those two political organisations inside?

SM: Yes.

BM: Yes, yes.

SM: Especially, IFP leaders they doesn't tell them about what federalism is. What IFP is. They mix that thing with owning the land, like amakhosi, you know . . .

[END OF SIDE A]

JM: You say that the other class was dealing with poetry.

SM: Poetry, yes. Another was dealing with Speech and Drama. What Speech and Drama is. You know, acting. At the end of the day we want to go outside to perform for the community. We want to create poetry, actors, politicians, you know. People who understand what's happening outside. That was the [indistinct] because we were trying to be creative, we used that opportunity to see warders looking *The Mercury* or *Sunday News* [sic]. We took that paper, we find some information. Oh, this is new information. We believe that –

JM: Were you allowed to read newspapers inside? Did you get newspapers?

SM: Later.

BM: Later. Before they didn't allow a prisoner to get news.

SM: Some prison warder they know our history before, outside. They give us some few hours, talk with us. We use them . . . some books that are dealing with the class we have. We call it 'each one teach one class'. That slogan we have is to keep them free. Even them they supposed to give us some lessons. We say this is 'each one teach one class' . . . But it was alright until the end. I was going first.

BM: But before the vote, Sipho went from Waterval to New Prison. But unfortunately

let us also mention that we eventually won, because the government granted a vote to us, a right to vote, the prisoners. Although there was a condition. If you are a maximum prisoner you are not allowed to vote. At least, thanks God, because some of the prisoners could vote. That's what we wanted so much. So before the vote we faced another struggle now, to go back to Pietermaritzburg. When we were in Waterval, it's like – I don't know – a concentration camp. You are not allowed to move to another prison, to your next of kin. You are not even allowed – unless if your sentence is about, is about, unless you've got a date, a discharge date.

SM: Three months.

BM: Three months coming you are allowed. But it is too far. Even our visitors it's not easy to reach us. No transport . . . We are enjoying to sit down with our parents and discuss home affairs. So how can they reach there? They can't afford that. So we struggle to come back to New Prison again. We tell them next month we are going to embark on another hunger strike for transfer. They say, no, no, no guys, don't go to hunger strike. We have to sit down and discuss about this.

SM: And we enjoy that what we are studying now. They look now –

JM: They see that you –

SM: Are going alright. There's no conflict.

JM: There's no conflict. They're behaving –

BM: So at the end of the day what we have noticed is that they were just crossing us when they come and said we must come here to discuss about our transfer. They say, no, no, no I'm busy now. Come back. You know. Things was like that. But at the end of the day we came up with a strategy. Me, Sipho and Bheki. We came up with a strategy. Sipho, because you are physically challenged maybe they can allow you to go according to the grant of the doctor. Maybe they can transfer you. It's a medical transfer. So that if you reach there, to the New Prison, do not stay there . . . you must struggle to take us back to the New Prison. Sipho say very good. We make an appointment to the doctor. Ja, on Thursday if I'm not mistaken. He used to come on Thursday. 'So, Doctor, I'm not feeling good here. It's cold. In my legs.'

SM: 'I lost even that piece I had.'

BM: 'Otherwise I can lose even this piece I have.' Because on that day he was walking with the crutches. In Waterval prison. So he came across here.

JM: Oh, they moved you.

BM: Ja. So when he was here he thought –

SM: And there were some advantages. Mr van Zyl, the prison authority from the New Prison, he sent us to Waterval. They told them that you musn't allow them to move. By luck we find that information. New Prison authority's changed. If you go to the new one maybe things will change.

BM: So there he fought, he fought too much. One day when we were at the soccer field one of the prison warder called us, 'Hey, hey, Mkhize, Bhek'themba, come here, there's a phone for you.' It's a call from Sipho. Be aware. Make some application, transfer application. Because what they said here you must write an application, transfer application, so that they can approve it. Because at the end of the day they don't want you to blame them, you take me from Waterval to New Prison, now you do not want to grant my privilege. So they want to ensure

about that. So we did write an application, me and Bheki, and we sent it to the head of the prison. I don't know what was happening on the prison side, but to the following week I saw Sipho coming with the transfer again.

SM: I'm coming back, back to Waterval. That prison authority at New Prison he doesn't show me a clear picture what's happening, you know, and I'm worried. I say, hey, Sipho, maybe they're losing concentration, I say guys, beware, make the application.

BM: Sipho was strongly believed that we are the actors. But we ignore our acting. We ignore while we was outside. We tried, but the circumstances, the environment was abnormal, you know, violence was here next to us, so we didn't enjoy it, the art, very well before we was arrested. Now let us enjoy the art, let us focus on the stage play. So which activity can we choose? [Indistinct.] We just heard about the programme of our political organisations that we must apply about the indemnity. It was called an indemnity. So all those who believe that their cases are politically motivated must write an indemnity to the government. Even our lawyer – our leader, S'fiso Nkabinde – he was an ANC at that time – so he came to us and told us and provided us with forms. So he used to come to us, having some meetings, but in bad conditions, in a control yard, whereby the other prisoners used to throw something down maybe. Even some of them spit saliva, something like that. So we just sit down, me and Sipho and Bheki, we say this is not good respect, especially to our leader. So the prison authorities must provide us with safe property.

SM: And if they allow our leaders to come inside, they supposed to recognise us as politicians.

BM: But they didn't recognise us as the politicians, so we were granting a safe place for our leaders so that push us and push our emotion to take some placards, write something like a petition and tell them we are demanding this, one, two, three. Especially a good place for our political leaders to have a meeting, if they come to see us. They mustn't take us to the control yard. Because it's not a good place.

SM: And we need them to allow us to run a political class as prisoners, because we don't know what is happening outside. If we come from prison, we are going outside, we are coming with bad influence, bad politics. We are looking at that kind of politics, but now it's changed. We supposed to have a right to talk about politics, legal. They said it's a small place, you can't run politics inside. We say guys we are more than two hundred, we supposed to have placards. We have artists. We have S'thembiso. He was a S'bansezwe member. Talented that guy. He was doing painting. We make placards. Early in the morning, when prison warders open their offices to go to eat, we go straight, we say, 'We want this!'

BM: But it was very, very unfortunate. Some of our comrades didn't want to join us. They were very, very scared. We were only four.

END OF TAPE.

INTERVIEW No. 6.

INTERVIEW BETWEEN JACOBUS MOOLMAN (JM), SIPHO MKHIZE (SM) AND BHEK'THEMBA MBHELE (BM).

DATE: 2 August 2003

VENUE: Office of Jacobus Moolman in the Tatham Art Gallery

SM: You remind me one poem I wrote when my leg was cut, you know. When I was in prison I'm facing lot of things. At New Prison – the prison department – they are dealing with you individually. They doesn't accept that Bhek'themba is my brother. They say they are treating each one . . . Sometimes Bhek'themba want to carry a food for me. Police they say no. They thought Bhek'themba, you know, maybe he want to stab someone, because we have a queue. We going on the queue. We can't go like this [indicates standing beside each other]. But Bhek'themba is supposed to take his food and come back and take my food. But I say if my leg is alright I will be fit enough to make it by myself. I wrote poem – I used to call my artificial leg like a product from gum tree.

JM: Like looking at your leg as if it's wood.

SM: Yes. Even the way I feel some people doesn't understand. This is pain to me. He put more painful, you know. If I supposed to carry a tea, porridge, you know.

JM: Because you've got crutches. How can you carry things when you've got crutches?

SM: Even when I was starting to use the artificial. I was using the walking stick.

JM: Yes, I remember.

SM: Even now it's a risk, you know, going without walking stick. I feel some pain. Walking stick make things easy. That's why I say you remind me of that poem I wrote. After that I accept that no, I can't change. You know, even if I dream – I was dreaming sometimes I'm running. I was crying in the morning when I see that, hey, no, still I can't run. But after I did that poem I was feeling alright. I say no, anyone who doesn't know what people who like me feel – now I believe that poem makes things clear. Like short temper. When my leg was cut I had a short temper, you know. Bhek'themba used to help me – not only washing, ironing, you know. Even in my mind. Now I say no, I'm living like anyone. I agree that I'm in that situation. I'm trying to say poems make something strong, not only to the readers, even you.

JM: What did you say? Sorry.

SM: Not only to the readers. They learn something, even myself.

JM: The person who wrote the poem –

SM: It's a lesson to him or her.

JM: This is for me what I'm trying to research. To think about. To write about in my project. The way that your poetry heals you, changes you, affects you. What does it do for you? Not the audience. Yes. That comes later, because we also write for an audience. We don't write sitting in a little corner and then we burn it. We don't. We keep it. Why do we keep it? You keep it because you want to share it

with someone. You don't throw it away. If it was just for ourselves you would write it and throw it away. Because then you finished. No. We keep it. So the idea of communication is very important. Communication with another person. But there is another part. And that's the part that I'm thinking about. That we've been talking about. That you've put your finger on right now, Siphos. Is what does it do for the author? The person who's writing that poem.

SM: And I can't against what I wrote before. You know what I mean. I can't against what I wrote before. Sometimes, okay, I'm trying to put right inside to me, care, you know, love. I wish to have positive mind every time. But I accept I wrote even to – It doesn't matter what poem, you know, what my concern in that poem, but each and every time I solve – Oh, I wrote a poem that I don't want to fight with someone. If someone want to fight with me I remember that poem I wrote I was talking about peace, love, happiness. That's why I agree with you if I say I can't wrote a poem after that. I say no. I'm putting there, you know. Like to be at prison. If I wrote some poems, I feel afraid. I remind myself that I'm too far with things what make me go back in prison. I'm trying every time to be far away from things that make me go inside. But poems are a part of that. If I recite, I say, no, this is good. I was feeling like that at that time. My memory is like a screen, you know. If I wrote a poetry I see that thing I was writing about. Even if that poetry now you recite, I have that feeling. I believe in myself – in my place, my special place.

JM: You go to a special place?

SM: Yes.

JM: Inside the writing or inside your mind?

SM: Inside my mind.

JM: Through the writing?

SM: Yes.

BM: If I can witness this guys. I can say poetry is a good medicine to the author. A good medicine to the author. I want to emphasise that. In fact, I have nothing different than what you are saying. I'm just stressing. It's a good medicine to the author. As Siphos said, during his lost of his leg he decided to wrote a poem. Just to accept his pain, as it is. Even anyone, any author, I believe it's a good medicine. Even I can feel the pain due to the misunderstanding between me and my girl-friend or wife I feel as if I can write a poem so that to console – to consolidate my mind. So poems are a very important thing. As you read your poem now I thought – Oh, my God! – I knew that he wrote this poem for a certain cause. Not just because I'm an author let me write. For a certain cause. There is a cause behind the poem or the lines of the poem. There is a cause that will force you to do something. That is a reason. A tangible reason. A different tangible reason to write a poem –

SM: And if I –

BM: Sorry to disturb you, but the overall of that reason is the pain. The overall of that different reason of the author is the pain.

SM: I remember when I was at hospital. The old ladies, most of the people who come at the hospital, they said, 'Oh, you are too young, my boy. Your leg is cut.' I say, yes. They said, 'Are you married?' If I say no, she say ooh! But I have some picture at that time. People they always read negative poem. We are living with

a poem at our place. When people starting to talk – it's the same – but sometimes it's not that kind of poem I like. It was a poem to me because most of women they was crying if they find that I'm not married, but my leg is cut. I took it as a poem. I said I hate that poem. It make me go down. It was the first time for me to have one leg. And I'm at hospital. That girl-friend I was having that time she was afraid even to look where's my leg, you know. I want to say people they discourage you outside. If I doesn't rehabilitate myself I can't expect Bhek'themba and you Mister Kobus to rehabilitate me. I supposed to be part of you – but poems make me against people who talk things make people go down. You saying, maybe a poem does the opposite thing. It can lift you up.

JM:

SM:

Ja.

JM:

But now what happens if that poem is writing about the pain? Does that bring you down or take you up?

SM:

No, it takes me up.

BM:

It gives me hope. Even if it's pain it gives me more power not to give up.

SM:

And I remember one day, every time if I find girlfriend, it's not easy for me to say do you understand poem? You know, it's not easy, but I pray God if I propose someone – oh God, I need that rock of artist, you know, because I'm specialising with art, you know, 'specially poem. I need to have girlfriend or wife who understand what poem is, you know. But sometimes I will bore her if I stay, if I took my paper and my ball pen, you know. I lost my girlfriend when she starting to understand what poem is. If I went to the funeral – we use as a culture with Bhek'themba - we read poem to pay attention [indistinct] I thought it's a real way to say farewell.

JM:

Sorry. Can I ask? Do you read the poem in English or in Zulu?

BM:

It depends.

JM:

Okay.

SM:

Ja.

JM:

In the same poem? Or different poems? One poem is in English. One poem is in Zulu.

BM:

Mixed.

SM:

But there's a poem in English – English have a lot of words for stressing, you know. If I want to stress, I use even Afrikaans. I make a research. I was with another guy who was good in Afrikaans . . . There's a poem I have who's English – I can't change to Zulu or any language. I like to use English. There's a poems I enjoy to read in Zulu, you know. It depends on if lyric or epic or sonnet. I say no, I like some if it's English. I'm not perfect in English, but I [indistinct].

JM:

You speak a lot about the different kinds of poetry. You speak about epic, sonnet, etc. I remember in that first book you guys wrote, I think it was you, Sipho, you were writing there about, that the poems in this collection were epic, they were sonnet, there were all these kinds of things. Where did you – was that from – were you remembering things that you had learnt at school, when you found those descriptions of poetry like epic, like sonnet?

SM:

No, Bhek'themba and Bheki, we used to cry that we need to understand if we are doing something. We need to understand deeply, you know, what – that we are concentrated to – what it is exactly. We used to visit in New Prison library, you know, to find out what poem is.

JM: Do you have poetry in the library?
 SM: Yes, although –
 BM: Not quite a lot of poetry.
 JM: Was it old poetry?
 BM: It was old poetry. Not modern poetry like *One Calabash, One Gudu*.
 JM: Did you have that?
 BM: Yes, we have it.
 JM: In the library?
 BM: Serious.
 JM: *One Calabash, One Gudu* by Mlungisi Mkhize?
 BM: Mlungisi Mkhize.
 JM: Was it in the prison library?
 BM: Ja. I don't know now. But New Prison's in another building now. I don't know do they still.
 SM: But maybe is worse now.
 JM: And could you borrow that book?
 SM: Yes, yes. For two weeks.
 SM: And we find – it was lucky. We used to call us a 'Each one Teach One' project in prison. Starting to encourage ourselves that we supposed to be open, there's no need to be afraid to ask something, you know.
 JM: If you don't know something –
 SM: We used to call *Ihlozo*. You know if you are trying to – if you are making tea. You not using tea bags. You using that tea. You supposed to put something –
 JM: Yes, yes. A sieve. A sieve.
 SM: In our culture we have thing like –
 JM: I know. I know. When you make the beer. What's it called?
 SM: *Ivovo*.
 JM: I know the *Ivovo*. Right.
 SM: We imagine with *Ivovo* that you find stronger if you pull it. By lucky that picture – that book was of information what epic is, sonnet. What find it in the book.
 JM: Can you remember that book?
 SM: We used to call *Ihlozo*.
 JM: Oh, the book was called *Ihlozo*.
 SM: You saw a picture of old lady using *Uvovo*. There's a lot of information there.
 JM: You can't remember who wrote that book.
 BM: It is a girl, hey.
 JM: It was a woman.
 SM: Like Gcina Mhlope.
 JM: Was it her?
 SM: Not exactly. But the way –
 JM: Oh, like her. How do you spell it? The word.
 BM: I-h-l-o-z-o. Which means *Uvovo*.
 JM: I would call it a beer strainer. A beer sieve, something like that.
 SM: Although, when we went to school, but when you finish, in fact you are not finish. You learn something new. We have clear picture about poem, but it doesn't give us, you know, how you can wrote. I starting to wrote lyric, but I expecting to wrote sonnet, but later I try to understand to remind myself, this is

- a real sonnet, what's the rule of sonnet. We have different choice.
- JM: And did you try – when you were inside did you try and write a sonnet and different kinds of things?
- SM: Yes. Yes. And we have different choice. Sometimes we say, Bhek'themba let's write a poem to our girlfriend. Bhek'themba say sonnet is good if you talking about love. Epic is good if you talking about struggle, you know. That's why I say you was a part of our learning, you know. Not only *Ihlozo*. And I admire *Ihlozo*, because we find something. We used to find guys in prison – that guy – I remember one guy Mchunu. He was not sure that he was good to wrote a poem. He was not aware.
- JM: Was he part of our group?
- SM: No. He was a S'bansezwe. He was an actor. One day it's closed inside we took our paper, wrote poetry, you know. He say, hey guys, what you doing? We say take that ball pen. It's easy. Although we know it's not easy. But just to –
- BM: To encourage him.
- SM: Ay! It's unbelievable! Unbelievable. I say poem is not marketing, not marketable enough. I don't know, but I hope you understand what I mean. Even to the Arts and Culture Council. They don't categorise poetry like music. That we have competition for poet four times or six times a year, you know. We say there's a lot of people who's good to show audience, you know. And I learn new feelings, even the way he recite, I see his face. I say, I like this, it's good.
- JM: But you're quite right there, people don't – when they look, when they think about art and culture – they, as you say, they think about music and dance and drama, stage plays, acting, but they don't think about poetry. They forget about poetry.
- BM: I don't know why. Maybe we're in the mist.
- JM: Poetry's got a bad name. It's got a bad name. You go to school, you talk to the kids –
- BM: But I don't know why because where there's a gathering of people if you recite a poem, you can see, they all admire you. Ay, your poem, it's all right. Even the mayor of this town. If I can come to the stage before his speech and recite a poem. He can praise me. But forget me when it comes to some bursaries or the budget. Forget me to his budget. I don't know why. That's why I say we are in the mist. But that cannot stop us to do what we are doing. We have to fight.
- SM: And Bhek'themba you remind me *Echo*. I support *Echo*. Even *The Natal Witness*, you know. Their journalists, their work. Each and every time we knew what's happening in Maritzburg. Although we want to know about the world, you know. But they discourage me. They say we put poem if we have the space.
- JM: Yes, other things come first. Advertising. Adverts come first. Big adverts. Because the advert is money.
- BM: But we want them to be developed because – what can I say? – poem or writing is a rich thing. Rich thing. But I don't know why because they regard advertising as a very very rich –
- JM: But we know in the world that money is – how can I say it? People have more respect for money than for [*indistinct*]. Something you can't see it. You can't see a poem. I mean, you can, it's on the paper. But it's also inside. It's inside here. You can't take a poem and – like with money, you know.

BM: You remind me what Sipho said.
SM: We started as a joke. We said –

END OF TAPE.

INTERVIEW No. 7.

INTERVIEW BETWEEN JACOBUS MOOLMAN (JM) AND BHEKI MKHIZE (BM)

DATE: 1 October 2003.

VENUE: Office of Jacobus Moolman in the Tatham Art Gallery.

JM: Do you remember this [the manuscript of *We Waiting in the Dark*]? I got this from Miss Macleod

BM: Ja.

JM: Do you remember writing this book?

BM: Okay, okay. Ja. There was three of us here.

JM: Ja.

BM: Oh boy!

JM: Is it coming back?

BM: It's coming back to me now. I told you about this. We got some 'anger poems' in this thing . . . Hai, Kobs! I clean forget about this.

JM: Is it?

BM: I'm choked.

JM: Before I even met you, before I met you, I got this book from Miss Macleod. She gave it to me, must be – I can't remember now, it must be '96, something like that – maybe even '97.

BM: 'Cause we sent it out from August '95.

JM: No, but that's when you wrote it.

BM: When we wrote it. Oh, ja.

JM: Maybe that's when you wrote the letter. Maybe you'd written all the poems beforehand.

BM: Yes. 'Cause I'll tell you this, it was like our daily bread, day after day, night after night.

JM: Were you together?

BM: Together.

JM: In one cell?

BM: All of us.

JM: Did you write the whole day? Or did you have a fixed time, a specific time that you write?

BM: I will tell you this. Right. You sit in the cell. There's too much prisoners doing things, you see. So we don't want to get involved in what they do because they won't give us any certificate. It's still for them. For inside the prison, so our mind was focussing outside to – we tried to compare inside and outside. So each and every time we get we write down – whatever we see we write down. Sometimes we find – maybe me or Bhék'themba or Sipho with a pen. Every time.

JM: Now how – I'm interested – because . . . this [*We Waiting in the Dark*] is written by three people. How do you do that? Is it one person who writes one poem or is it three people working together on one poem?

BM: Some of the poems. And other poems are different, you see. 'Cause now

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sometimes we have to sit down and discuss things, things we see. Right. We discuss the things. Sometimes Bhék'themba tell me how he feels . . . that and that and that. I come with my views. Sipho comes with his views. Sometimes you say, this I feel, I can say it. I got more to say, but I can't say it now, you'll see on my paper. Right. And I write . . . You see like a meeting, you know. When you got something in your mind, like you say, okay, I got these lines, go write it down, then we come and sit together, see how it works. Each and every one when he finished to write a poem he have to produce it in front of us. We sit together. Let's see this poem. Okay. Sometimes there's a mistake there. Maybe I'll correct them. Maybe they'll correct me. That's how we work.

JM: So you share together –

BM: All the time –

JM: You look at them and they look at your – and you compare like that.

BM: Yes, yes. That's why we all come together like this . . . Right. Now our problem was this. We don't have paper to write, because that time, in prison, you have to have your own stationery. Or the stationery comes once. You don't write anything, if you want to write you must get a member of your section, and ask for an official – they call it official – paper to write. You must have your own ballpen. They don't give you a ballpen.

JM: Can I stop you? Can I ask you a question? What group were you at this stage? Because I know that certain groups are allowed permission to write and certain groups are not allowed permission to write. Were you allowed permission to write?

BM: No.

JM: So you were writing –

BM: Maximum.

JM: Were you Maximum at this stage?

BM: Yes, Maximum at this stage.

JM: So Maximum's not allowed –

BM: Not, not. Even when you write for an application it's taken by the member to the head of the prison, if you want to write to the head of the prison. You allowed to have one paper to write.

JM: One paper – do you mean –

BM: It's called an official. A letter. You can write to the head of the prison or to your people. And you know how strict those people are. When you write they've got to see this thing first. It goes to the censors. They got to censor it. Right. Especially, you know, I'll tell you something. You know, inside, they were too strict according to their laws. When you write something, you must write like that doesn't talk about the prison. What's happening in the prison and all that.

JM: But I've seen poems here that talk about violence in the prison.

BM: Because you know why, we were doing it illegally. But we know if they get this thing, we will stand for it. Because we talking about things we know. We inside too. You know, when you feel something – It's fallen like a deaf ears. You go to tell the person, look, like say you the father of the children, you got all of your children, but some of your children don't care. [Indistinct.] The Seven Days War.

JM: Now that's a whole another story we need to speak about.

BM: Ja.

JM: All of that side.
 BM: All of that side.
 JM: And I know it's difficult.
 BM: It's difficult . . . That's why while we were being inside, we feel that pain, we feel all those things that happened to us, now we are the other situation now. We have to face it. We have to stand for it. We can't go back. We have to go forward. That time, you know, in our mind, while we were going to prison, we thought prison is not as bad as people used to say. But when we got there – first of all, my blood, and my black brothers, it was a threat to us, to anyone you know. I can say that because there was gangsterism inside – called twenty-six and twenty-seven. So those people who don't want to involve themselves in gangsterism they call them m'patas – stupid.

JM: Am I allowed to ask you about those days – the Seven Day War?
 BM: Sure. You are allowed to ask.
 JM: What was it like?
 BM: Kobz, it was like, you know, when you grow up in the village, you see everything, you see grandmother's, children playing all the time. But one silly day it will change, all of those things. Okay. The Seven Day War it was like this. There was a meeting that was going to be held in Durban. It was about the IFP, or something like that. From there – what I've heard – all the IFP members, all from everywhere that were going to that meeting in Durban.

JM: Can you remember when this was maybe?
 BM: What? The Seven Day War?
 JM: No. This meeting you were talking about. Are we talking '85? Are we talking '87?
 BM: No. The Seven Day War was in '90. You know, I don't remember exactly the day or the month. But the year I remember. Because when these people they coming back from their meeting, arriving back now to go to their different places – what I remember clearly they were coming with the buses – when they start shooting people from Edendale Hospital. Because the message was heard from them: they need to plant mealies all over the Edendale place. You know, when the leader is telling the people he wants to plant all the mealies, so they must go and demolish everything, they want everything to be flat there. So these people were coming back from their meeting. They started shooting. So –

JM: Were you and Bhhek'themba and Sipho involved at that stage? In the defense committee?
 BM: Yes.
 JM: You were involved already?
 BM: We were already involved because while there was a strike and all these things we were in the block committee. You know what we call a block committee. Sometimes, you know, when we going to have a strike, so the leaders come, they tell us it's a block committee. We know what's going on. From four o'clock in the morning we take all the scrap cars. Put it in the road. No-one is going to work.

JM: You must have been young then?
 BM: Ay, I was young.
 JM: How old were you then? Seventeen, sixteen?

BM: Not very young. I was about twenty-one. Because I was approaching twenty-four when I went to prison. In 1991. I was sentenced in 1993.

JM: But you were arrested in?

BM: 1991. All along we were awaiting trial. It was hard for us to go to trial. Maybe if you remember we went to hunger strike too. Right. In those days I was in the block committee.

JM: Okay. So we talking about 1990.

BM: 1990.

JM: Because you were with the late Harry Gwala. Is that correct? He was –

BM: Yes. And my late brother.

JM: That's right. Muzi.

BM: Muzi. He was the one who was really involved in the struggle.

JM: More so than –

BM: Most. You know, he was involved in the Youth League. I was involved in the Youth League too. He was involved in the union. Cosatu. So. Ja. Harry Gwala when he came out of prison he came to stay where he was with his wife in Dambuza. We looked after that house. So when he come back, we go with him to address – because people they knows about ANC, but they don't know what ANC is about. So he need to address the people. What is the ANC. Why he went to prison. So we start to handle from all those days, you know. Addressing the people. That time he was mobilizing for the ANC.

JM: The ANC was still banned at that time.

BM: The ANC was still banned. But we had information. We used to get information. What's going on in the country, what's going on outside the country. Even today there's an old lady, she couldn't believe – because I told them about the voting. We were sitting around the table and I said you know one day we will vote. She said, no, no, no, my son, you don't know nothing. I'm older than you. I know everything about this one. You're still young. Don't tell me about vote. We won't vote. I said to her, let me tell you one thing, once we vote you going to have your own house. She said, that's a lie. I don't believe you. Okay. We try to explain to them. You know, while I was in prison, the voting things came. We fight for the vote. We fight for everything. We fight for the struggle. But we went to prison. The most painful thing happened to us, we couldn't vote, on that 1994 election. But because we like the struggle, we still mobilize. We still fighting.

JM: Inside?

BM: Yes. For people to vote for ANC. Prisoners to vote for ANC. Because Danie Schutte was talking that time – I don't know – capital crime they can't vote. Those having crimes they can't vote. We fight for that thing. But we see now we don't vote. That time we in Waterval. That place, that prison, no prisoners are talking. Only the members are talking. But we tell it. We want to vote. You know, the head of the prison he was Mr Venter. He was just like that [Gestures]. He was a giant, you know. When he talks everyone shiver. And now he heard that there was a big noise inside his prison. Now the members they running to him. They say, we can't stop the prisoners. He say what happened? What's going on? They say, there's three brothers they came and spread stories around. Okay. He came to us and said, guys, I heard about you long time ago. Come. Let's sit in my office. What you doing here? We say we pulling years. I'm pulling fifteen

years, and thirteen years and he's ten years. There was another guy. He's Bheki. His name's Bheki too. Four of us. He was pulling ten years. I said to him, look, I like to stay in prison because I committed a crime. But in this situation I can't stay. This is not a prison. It's like a prisoner of war – where you throw somewhere, like we not even human beings. Now he start looking at us. What you know about human beings? I say I know I commit a crime . . . But if I did something wrong, show me I did something wrong. Treat me like a human being, then I can know that I did something wrong. But if you treat me this way, I'll think what I did was right and I'll carry on doing it. He said, wait, wait, wait, what you talking about now. I said right inside here the prisoners they need to be free to vote. By that time we were still sleeping on the floor – Tell me – from 1991 we were sleeping on the floor.

JM: What year was this? 1994?

BM: Yes.

JM: You were at Waterval?

BM: Waterval. And for us to go to Waterval – it was not like we wanted to go to Waterval. You know why, because that thing was happening inside the prison, prisoners stabbing each other –

JM: At New Prison?

BM: New Prison.

JM: 1993?

BM: '93.

JM: There's a poem here. Sipho wrote about that.

BM: So we published – That I told you. So, every time when we see something we don't like, when we talk to a member or someone it's falling to deaf ears, like you talking to yourself. Okay, we say, so there's some community outside who wants to know exactly what's going on. 'Guys, listen to me. Let's smuggle a letter to *Echo*.' So they say, ja. So we write down exactly what's going on – we want them to publish this thing. And put our names too. The three of us. We publish. As we going to court – that time we were awaiting trial.

JM: So you were not sentenced yet.

BM: Not sentence yet. We were awaiting trial. As we going to court we got this letter. Our mother comes to see us. [*Indistinct*] She won't ask why. She knows us. Kobs, I tell you, while we were awaiting trial – boom! On the front page of *The Natal Witness*, what's going on inside. Now . . . ay! They call us. The head of the prison. He ask us are you so and so and so? Did you write this? I say yes. Then, why? I say, I'm sleeping here in prison. I'm talking about something here that's happening inside. People wants to know about it. He say, who told you people wants to know about it? I say, I know people wants to know because even I too while outside, I didn't want to know about the prison, but this time around I think people needs to know. At that time we were on a hunger strike, we want to go on trial, because we still awaiting trial. You see, they never gave us a date for supreme court. While that time the head of the prison is calling us, we on a hunger strike. He ask us, why you on a hunger strike? We say we want to go for trial. He said, okay guys, before we talk I'll write everything to tell those people to set a date. I said, hey, you can do that! He said, ja, I can do that. Right! We go to court. We start trialing. Trial, trial, trial. It takes about a month. Okay. We

lost the case.

JM: What – when were you sentenced?

BM: I was sentenced March 1993. March 31.

JM: Because I've seen some things in *The Natal Witness*.

BM: About the case?

JM: About the case. Yes. In March 1993. Early March. Ja, I've seen two articles. Two stories. [*Indistinct*]

BM: Even paper it was like meat to us.

JM: Can I just stop you? What group were you at this stage?

BM: Maximum. We were not allowed to write.

JM: Won't you tell me what is the sentence each of you got? What year did each of you get?

BM: First, let me tell you this thing, the thing run concurrently. I was sentenced to fifty-five years. Bhek'themba was sentenced to forty-five years. Sipho thirty years. So all this – I don't know how they count it – it runs concurrently. So it ends up I'm fifteen years. Bhek'themba thirteen. Sipho ten –

JM: So then were there different sentences?

BM: Yes.

JM: For different offences?

BM: Yes, I had five counts.

JM: Can you tell me what they were?

BM: Murder times three. And attempted murder and arson. [*Indistinct*] The judge said, you were the leader of all these things. And I'm older than them too. They younger than me. [*Indistinct*] I commit the crime in anger.

JM: What position did you take in the defense committee?

BM: Ja, in fact –

JM: Roles or something like that.

BM: The role I used to play – I was in the blocking committee. Sometimes in our area – You know, they got all combat names our streets like MK, Tanzania. So in our street we call it the Soviet.

JM: There's a poem where you speak about 'washing the streets'. There's an idea in my mind it's not just to keep the streets clean, but it's because something has – maybe there's been bloodshed.

BM: Ja, you know, when we say we want to wash the streets, there's too much bloodshed in our streets. Too much blood was shed. And, you know, when we speaking truly like human beings, we didn't like what was happening, but the situation was force us to be like that. So now we feel like, you know, it wasn't supposed to be, but this time around we have to clean the streets, wash our streets, to remove those dirty stains 'cause it wasn't supposed to be. We want our children to grow up to not feel that, not see that, but to hear about it. What happened. [*Indistinct.*] Part of the block committee. And in the structure like to solve a problem in the community, like, like we youth used to – someone's stealing, he's worrying his mum, like the boy from next door he steal from next door, so now we have to come and sort that problem, like if we going to give him a punishment, like he's going to clean his mother's yard.

JM: So you were part of the people's court.

BM: Ja. I was part of the people's court. We solved so many problems. And the worst

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part of it was the time in December '99 we were fighting two wars.

JM: Not 1999. 1990.

BM: 1990. Sorry. 1990. My mistake. We were fighting two different wars. Okay. What do I mean by that? At the Seven Days War we were fighting Inkatha people. In our area we were also fighting with amaQola. We call them amaQola. Gangsterism. Those people who worry the community. They take money. They start raping them. All those things. And the elder people they come to us. 'We know you. You grow up in front of us. Please. We don't want to go to the police, because they don't care. The police, we can tell them, they don't solve our problem. You need to solve the problem. Stop what they [the gangsters] are doing. They harassing the people. We open a workshop. So I was in charge of the workshop. We building Zapper guns. So it was like that. From the Seven Days War we fight Inkatha, on this side we fight gangsterism. We cleaning the area. We defending the area. Cleaning the area. We fighting this side. We defending against some people who are coming to attack us. They know that we fighting each other. It was tough. It was very tough. But we sorted. They call me a commander. Because I know the place. I know how to tell them. We don't sleep in our house now. We sleep in the mountains.

JM: Now the offences for which you were sentenced. You speak about three murder, one attempted murder and one arson. Is that connected with these gangsters or is it something else?

BM: It's connected with those people who are IFP members. They also killed my brother. Ja. They were connected with that. They were IFP members and they also killed my brother. The attempted murder we had a meeting. One of their fellows this group he was at the meeting. If, like we talking to these guys, the community attacked him. As they attacked him, because there was a lot of people, because they know I'm the one who wants to revenge to my brother, so they implicate me. They said, we see Bheki. I agree. I say it's me hundred percent. I called the meeting. I wanted to find out how did they kill my brother. [Indistinct.] What I did I was provoked, you see. And the anger was there. So I agree, I did this crime. I'm not say I didn't do it. There was a reason to do this crime.

JM: You say that was the reason. One of the poems is called, "Prisoners of Reasons". Is that what you mean?

BM: Ja. That's what I mean. There's a reason. You know, you love your brother, and you were planning big with him, you know, especially in the struggle. And you want to build a house. From that time, me, him, Sipho, Bhék'themba, we put our money together. We open our own tuckshop. So we were planning big that time. We were planning big. So now imagine those people they taking one of your – who's planning big with him. We say, see what they doing to me now. You know, all my hopes are gone. That's why we say we the prisoners of reasons. Because we fight. We fight. We fight for the struggle that side. We fight for our lives this side. And we want to support our families at the same time. But I'll tell you this, we give ourselves to the struggle. Because even our mother – the mother of my children she's still crying today. She say, you patriotic. You love your country, even you forget about us. You know, you forget about to look after us. You fight for your country. This time, they are free, but you are still

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fighting for freedom. I said to me, I know what I was doing was coming from my heart. No-one was pushing me. Because if someone was pushing me from the back I should cry for that person. Some people, I agree, some people were used in the struggle. Some people were used. But I wasn't used. Because I knew what was happening. I knew what was going on. That's why we call ourselves prisoners of reasons. [Indistinct.] I'm finished! I've paid for my crime. I've paid for my crime. I've been punished. And I feel that I'm free now. You know sometimes, I used to stand next to the window in my cell, I'm thinking of my children, my people, you see. So I was wishing to be a star. A star can see what they doing. How they doing. So that's why I say I wish to be a star.

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