

FINDING THE DURBAN MOMENT IN CAPE TOWN

NEW DIRECTIONS IN STUDENT ACTIVISM IN THE WESTERN CAPE 1972-1976

INTRODUCTION

University of the Western Cape rector Brian O’Connell writes, in 2010, that “By 17 June 1976 [...] with only Coloured and some Indian students and a few Coloured lecturers, UWC assumed control of the struggle in the Western Cape”.¹ O’Connell is correct, of course. His “by” implies that 1976 had antecedents, one of which was 1973, maybe even the cataclysmic Durban strikes early that year. In Coloured areas of the greater Cape Town, a history unfolded whereby students reached their watershed moments in 1973 and 1976. This paper unfolds and interrogates student activism at UWC; it looks at the new language (tools) students used; it explores if and how students broadened the liberation struggle as at 1973 – the Durban Moment. It argues for a Cape Town movement that found a strange new voice (vocabulary), a new discourse that transcended older modes of expression, regionalism, and student activism in South Africa.

The activist moments of the Western Cape seemingly came in the wake of the 1973 Durban strikes. The students who were at or entered UWC in February 1973 had knowledge of the strike wave that had hit Durban the month before. Henry Isaacs, a senior student who hailed from Pietemarijburg, close to the Durban action, might have been inspired by it. He was already a senior student at UWC and had been elected president of the South African Students Organisation (SASO) some two weeks before strike wave started. Another student, Leonardo Appies by this time was a junior student at UWC and already an adherent of liberation theology.

This paper traces the student movement in the Western Cape from 1973 through 1976, placing Isaacs and Appies in the centre of it. It asks if and to what extent the moments of 1973 and 1976 connected the Western Cape to the national protest theatre and if this region, riding on the energetic backs of students, nationalised the struggle. By looking at a series of events, organic and composed, and dipping into student produced tracts and interrogating aspects of their new vocabulary, the paper explores how the students of the Western Cape retooled for the revolution.

UWC IN THE 1960s

In 1962 UWC freshman student Ambrose George and a group of friends – Frank Musson from Kimberley; and August Matzimella and Raymus Cunningham from Port Elizabeth, and a few others – organised themselves into a study cell in Lloyd Street Bellville South. At this time all UWC students boarded off campus and there they held the political discussions. Soon they learned about the Non-European Unity Movement and African People’s Democratic Union of Southern Africa (APDUSA), and invited non-student activists to campus and, going the other way, attended “parties” in Cape Town.²

Similarly, George Botha studied at UWC 1967-1969. He served on the first SRC at that institution and thus became a student leader. The post-Rivonia fear and trembling kept the lid on student politics, and the fact of running for office placed Botha in an activist category. [...] While at university the security police kept an eye on him and on occasion searched his home in Port Elizabeth. He and his friends Johnny Klassen, Bruce Simon, and Jimmy Matzimela joined a political cell close to APDUSA. Although local Frank van der Horst was not a student at UWC, he often visited the campus to educate newly arrived students politically, to make sure they understood they were not there “just to party”.³

In 1966 the students boycotted the Republic Day celebrations and the next year some of them snubbed speaker on Coloured culture Dr Richard van der Ross. At the same time the students stood ambivalent about an institutionally recognized SRC. At this time, UWC students attended University Christian Movement meetings. They also knew of the formation of SASO, the South African Students Organization, in 1969.

Furthermore, throughout the 1960s UWC stood ambivalent toward the institution, not knowing if to embrace it or to reject it, whether to accept an institutionally approved SRC or not.

In 1970, UWC suspended one Desmond Demas for not wearing a tie to lectures. Demas explained, “Because of the oppression of the time [...] I expressed my frustration by deliberately challenging the dress code.”⁴ With the Demas tie-affair students found that activism could be fun; that they could beat the “system” if they organised; that they could win; moreover, it emboldened them and “changed the political atmosphere to one of defiance”.⁵

This undercurrent of disaffection placed UWC students in a place of readiness to experiment with assertive forms of activism, activism that involved a new vocabulary and new modes of protest.

The years 1972-73 changed all that. Suddenly the talk was black, so to speak. But let us first look at another contemporaneous development, which perhaps preceded the Coloured embrace of black – conscientization! I should like to argue that new ideologies, and a new vocabulary, a new set of terms, entered the minds and hearts of Coloured students country-wide as of about 1972.

CONSCIENTIZATION

Sometime around 1970, a curious, rather un-English word slipped into the conversation of black students in South Africa, it even became part of the lingo of Coloured students at UWC. It did not entre English dictionaries, though. That word was conscientization. The word was used actively as in “we must conscientize” and as in to conduct “conscientization programmes”. The author of this article first heard the word in 1973, when several UWC students, having been expelled or suspended from UWC, started teaching at Bellville South High and other Coloured schools on the Cape Flats.

The term conscientization turned out to be, I learned that year, a translation of the Portuguese word conscientização, which is also translated as “consciousness raising” and “critical consciousness”.

Moreover, in the understanding of the UWC students I had spoken to, it also meant reaching or touching the conscience of people.

The term was popularized by Brazilian educational activist and theorist Paulo Freire in his 1970 work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The term meant “to bring to consciousness”. Photocopies of this book circulated rather vigorously on the UWC campus at least in 1973 through 1978. In it Freire encourages a dialogical education process and reaching out to the poor and illiterate. This we shall see later in the paper washed well with the students’ newfound penchant for “community”.

The term apparently sprung from Frantz Fanon's coinage of a French term, *conscienciser*, in his book, *Black Skins, White Masks*. As explicated herein, Fanon’s idea of therapy (he was a psychiatrist), or liberation if you will, is contained in the concept *consciencise* or the phrase “to *conscienciser*”, meaning to bring to consciousness the unconscious, so as “to free the patient from his unconscious desire and to orient him towards social change”.⁶ This text too circulated freely among Coloured students. This term, *conscienciser* was never used by the students even if they had certainly read *Black Skins, White Masks*; the concept of conscientization however was liberally used in common student parlance.

Freire took this “consciousness” business a bit further. For him conscientizacao meant arriving at critical consciousness through a dialogical project, an engagement with the contradictions of human life to arrive at an answer. Freire writes that community engagement and dialogue required love and humility, an interactive horizontal relationship. “How can I dialogue,” he asks “if I start from the premise that naming the world is the task of an elite [...] How can I dialogue if I am closed to – and even offended by – the contribution of others?” This is to be followed by faith in and critical dialogue with the people.⁷

More understandable, and removed from a psychiatric context, was the students’ understanding of the educational context. To quote from another text, Freire asserts, and it seems the UWC students accepted: “We began with the conviction that the role of man was not only to be in the world, but to engage in relations with the world – that through actions of creation and re-creation, man makes cultural reality and thereby adds to the natural world [...] We were certain that man’s relation to reality, expressed as a Subject to an object, results in knowledge, which man expresses through language.”⁸ One student asserted that both Freire works, *Education: The Practice of Freedom* and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* were read by all the secular radicals on campus.⁹

Riding the lilting waves of Freirean precepts, SASO, for instance, saw itself as contributing to “political, economic and social awareness and consciousness by permitting wider communication and conscientization”.¹⁰

BLACK

A number of SASO conference bulletins, newsletters and reports appeared in 1972. They explained black consciousness as “an attitude of mind, a way of life” positioning black people dialectically opposite white superiority. For SASO the term black embraced of those South Africans who were “politically

oppressed". The term itself was a tool to achieve solidarity to challenge the system of apartheid. Henry Isaacs embraced this use of the word as early as 1971.

In the autumn of 1973, one Jean Swanson started talking to her parents about "being black". Her father Charles Swanson scoffed smilingly at this idea, retorting, "We're not black; we're Coloured, or brown. It's clear." Hereupon the 17-year-old Jean answered, "Well, it's not a matter of skin colour but of political identification; we are all oppressed, so we're all black."¹¹

We can accept that Coloured people thought of themselves as different from white people and the African majority and Indian minority in South Africa. This was both a social and a cultural reality. If up to then they had contemplated and worked toward concerted action with the rest of the oppressed people it would have been through an embrace of non-European solidarity, as sought by the Non-European Unity Movement, and with the use of the political tools of non-racialism, boycott and non-collaboration. A new possibility arose in Coloured ranks in the mid-1960s with the creation of the Coloured People's Representative Council and formations, such as the Federal Party and the Labour Party that supported that government initiative.

As of July 1973, several expelled and suspended UWC students started teaching in Cape Flats schools. Black poetry at high schools was part of the conscientization project of the black consciousness movement. One way of "reading the world" was through black poetry – usually painful emotions and experiences spilled onto paper.¹² In addition, at the same time, Dramsoc used theatre to conscientize people. In 1973-74, for instance, Peter Braaf and Dramsoc performed at Bellville South High and the Elsie River-Bishop Lavis high schools. Small used language to conscientize. It was not the language of the elite (Algemeen Beskaafde Afrikaans of the academy) but the language of the street, as in Joanie Galant-Hulle, as in Kanna Hy Ko Hystoe. Adam Small was perhaps the first person to alert budding activists of that thing called "community", this first through his poetry and later, in the early 1970s, with his lectures. He implicitly sent them into places such as Windermere and Cook's Bush. Small was also the first Coloured intellectual who identified himself as black. He embraced blackness in Afrikaans. And perhaps the first black consciousness adherents in the Western Cape were Afrikaans speaking Coloureds. Later, as if to underline his self-definition and identification, Small served on one of the committees of black consciousness outfit SASO.

African poetry and poetry by African poets became black poetry – the poetry of James Matthews, Adam Small, David Diop, Christine Douts, Pascal Gwala.

Black consciousness student leaders orchestrated the 1973 protests at UWC – Isaacs, Robbie Wood, Ben Palmer Louw. One of the first-year activists of 1973 recalled that "the students at the University of the Western Cape saw themselves as black".¹³

In 1975 a UWC sociologist CJ Groenewald, employing the Bogardus social distance scale, found that UWC students identified most strongly with black groups and least with Afrikaners.¹⁴ This was both a reactive (against the oppressor) and pro-active identification (solidarity in carrying out the liberation struggle) In addition, he found "toenemende gemeenskapsbelang" (increasing interest in community) among Coloured students.

In July 1976, the UWC Social Sciences Society wanted to conduct a Saturday symposium on the future of the Coloureds. In a mass meeting attended by about 500 students SRC president Leonardo Appies promptly put period to this idea. This was not acceptable, he explained, as the student body expected outreach to the black community, for which it sought solidarity. Appies reprimanded the SSS, saying, “we as a black campus cannot be so narrow-minded as to concern ourselves exclusively with a Coloured struggle”.¹⁵ Appies summarily suspended the constitution of the SSS. Although multiple layers of identity and political persuasion no doubt existed among the UWC students, no one opposed the harsh words and measure meted out to the SSS. This incident perhaps shows that the black approach was accepted at UWC, albeit not unanimously so.

In the period between Isaacs and Appies, UWC became a black campus, with many students identifying themselves as black.

LIBERATION THEOLOGY

While liberation theology had been around a while by the early 1970s and was indeed embraced by theology students (tokkelokke) at UWC, it was neither the most prominent discourse on campus and neither did theology students step to the fore to assume student leadership positions, this up to 1973. Black theology, an African-American variant of the Latin American liberation theology, one can perhaps assume, nudged the tokkelokke closer to black consciousness.

However, debate existed on the nexus between tokkelokke and secular radicals. Allan Grootboom, a secular radical close to the theology group, recalled that the key message that flowed from tokkelokke toward them was that “God was on the side of the oppressed and you as a Christian could not remain apolitical.” He added that “James Cone’s book, *The God of the Oppressed*, became our handbook.”¹⁶ In interview, so many years on, Grootboom quoted Gustavo Guterrez verbatim: “We can say that all political theologies, the theologies of hope, of revolution and liberation, are not worth one act of genuine solidarity with the exploited social classes. They are not worth one act of faith, love and hope, committed – in one way or another – in active participation to liberate men from everything that dehumanises him and prevents him from living according to the will of the Father.” Then in 1976, the debates “centred on social justice issues and that we could not sit and pray that the country would change. We had to make change happen.”¹⁷

In the wake of 1973, one of the leaders of that class (of secular radicals), Kenny Mathews, said “The mantle of leadership was consciously and deliberately given to the tokkelokke [theology students]. We believed that their leadership would give the struggle an acceptable face and at the same time deflect attention from the hard core secular activists.”¹⁸

Post 1973 the VCS or Vereniging van Christen Studente became the most vibrant student body on the campus of UWC, to an extent it became an intra-institutional home for liberation theology. In it the tokkelokke held sway – Abe Visagie, James Buys, Willa Boesak, Russell Botman, Peter Gelderbloem, Nico

Botha, Leonardo Appies and others. It was also the student organization most connected to kindred associations in South Africa. Coloured kids from all over South Africa belonged to it.

As of 1976, Allan Boesak, fresh from his studies in Holland and New York, started playing a prominent role in linking liberation theology to black consciousness. His seminal text in this regard, *A Farewell to Innocence*, became widely read. The key message was that God was on the side of the oppressed. The students began to appreciate that his son Jesus was misrepresented; that he was, as Andy Gradwell, a member of the Open Dialogue Society at UWC, put it, not “the white, blue-eyed Jesus”, but a “revolutionary” of the dusty walkways of Palestine who challenged those in power and their doctrinal conservatism.¹⁹

It seems that with the VCS in place, a coterie of budding liberation theologians at study, and a charismatic lecturer (Boesak) leading from the front, the student leadership would naturally pass to the tokkelokke. Mathews added, “We thought we should give the UWC student leadership an acceptable face, while retaining the revolutionary intentions of the broader student movement.”²⁰ In quick succession three tokkelokke took charge of student affairs, if not activism – Richard Stevens (1973-74), Howard Eybers (1975), and Leonardo Appies (1976).

Liberation theology, as articulated by them, gave the students a moral high ground, a Christian position with which they could live; it gave them thoughtful leaders, most prominently Leonardo Appies.

SASO, UWC AND COMMUNITY

It was really in the realm of community that the idea of conscientization, newfound black solidarity, and the moral high ground of God on their side played themselves out. As such it is necessary to consider community expansively.

Black consciousness spoke about community since taking its first steps; liberation theology insisted on responsibility toward “exploited social classes”, Adam Small took new ideas and style of language and gave it to the people. Community was used synonymously with “the people” or “the oppressed” or “society”. Also, the fact that student activists worked in townships and squatter camps, as we shall see, suggests the concept could be roughly equivalent to “working class” also.

As early as 1963 the poet Arthur Nortje predicted that “the college is bound to become the centre of cultural and sporting activities for the ‘Coloured’ community of the Western Cape”.²¹ This did in fact happen in the 1970s, for example with UWC rugby football’s affiliation to the unions in communities around the campus. But first a link was established between university and community, with the political and social programmes flowing from the side of the students.

About two years after black students founded SASO, Steve Biko, addressing the organization’s leadership at the its 1st National Formation School in Edendale on 1 December 1971, said: “We have a responsibility not only to ourselves but also to the society [community] from which we spring. No one else will ever take the challenge up until we, of our own accord, accept the inevitable fact that

ultimately the leadership of the non-white peoples in this country rests with us". He included among the aims of SASO the shaping the black political thinking.²² (Biko, 1987: 5 and 7)

The SASO constitution spoke more broadly of the challenges facing blacks generally, rather than only black students, and committed SASO "to the realisation of the worth of the black man, the assertion of his human dignity and to promoting consciousness and self-reliance of the black community".²³ The aims of SASO included getting students to "become involved in the political, economic and social development of the Black people" and "to become a platform for expression of black opinion".

We thus see by 1971 word circulates that students saw themselves as black rather than African, wanted to go out into their communities to do conscientization work in order, in the end, to transform South Africa.

As part of community development, SASO conducted literacy programmes and a "Home Education Scheme". The literacy project was taken over from the University Christian Movement in 1972. Literacy was seen as playing an important role in "bringing the Black community closer to liberation". A Director of Literacy was appointed to "plan, execute and set up literacy classes throughout the country" and students were urged to "play their role in the sensitising [read conscientizing] of our community".

SASO set "Home Education Scheme" in the same year as a "natural follow-up of the Literacy Project". It was intended to provide adult education for the newly literate and tuition for correspondence school students by running classes near universities and vacation schools in select centres.²⁴

During a tour of black campuses in early-1973, Biko noticed the "eagerness of the students [...] to relate whatever is done to their situation in the community".²⁵ About the same time, Henry Isaacs, referring to an academic freedom demo at the University of Cape Town, dismissed the struggle for academic freedom, explained: "We [as students] had a far more important obligation to the black community at large and that what we should begin to do is to look at ways and means of fulfilling our obligations to that community."

While the UWC students may have embraced the idea of conscientization by 1971-72, the ideas of "blackness" and "community" were not yet uppermost in their minds by end 1972. This would soon change.

COMMUNITY AND CONSCIENTIZATION 1972-1976

In July 1972 SASO Western Cape reported to the 3rd General Students Council that "The branch has at present 120 members while the majority of the 1226 students on campus subscribe to the policies of SASO even though we are not centrally affiliated," adding that it had embarked on "intensive and extensive conscientization at Bush, Hewat and at high schools." They also contemplated community programmes. Here, I expect the students took a leaf out of Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, wherein he explicates the concept of "conscientizacao". Events soon overtook them, and at the same time nudged them toward community in ways not anticipated.

The class of 1973, when UWC students protested a host of grievances and faced suspension and expulsion, they took their case to their communities. One off campus meeting to inform “the community” took place in the Congregational Church Hall on Samuel Street, Sarepta in mid-June, 1973. Johnny Issel, long-haired and looking mighty tired, led this meeting.

Henry Isaacs had a gentle way of opening students’ eyes. He would speak to any student anywhere, if first year or post-graduate. He practised conscientization by showing, not telling. In 1973 the battle about the legitimacy of the SRC at UWC raged and headed for the courts, the students being the applicants. But they, the student leadership, had no money. One innocuous morning Isaacs asked a freshman, one Jean Swanson, to enter a debutante ball to raise fund for the court case. She declined when she heard that it involved “politics”, saying her father had told her if she became involved in politics she would end up on Robben Island.²⁶ Isaacs told Swanson he wanted to show her something that might change her mind about politics. She said yes and he drove her to Kreefgat, a squatter camp near Elsie River that hid a mess of humanity. The flies around the eyes poverty, the fetid filth like rising damp Swanson saw that day converted her to the cause of fighting poverty, exploitation and oppression. This was one of the communities the activist set spoke of, one of sets of people who had to be conscientized toward liberation from the oppressor, she realised.

Isaacs relates: “We worked particularly among high school students. We began to organise regular leadership training seminars for high school students in different parts of the Cape Flats and we began to inculcate in them not only the idea of all persons who were not white being subjected to a common oppression [but also] that all of us had grown up under the system and that we had known whites only as oppressors.²⁷ Some of the leadership proceed to teach “unqualified” in Cape Flats schools, among them Nicky, Charlyn Wessels, and William Whittles. They turned the head of high schoolers, conscientizing them to consider alternatives, to arm themselves with black speak, and to hold them up as future community leaders.

Also in 1973, activist Cecyl Esau, then in high school in Worcester, attended the mass meetings UWC students held in his home town. Years on, speaking about this, he said: “The response we received from the people and their perceptions of the political situation in our country made a lasting impression on me. It was clear to me that the vast majority of the people were vehemently opposed to the apartheid system but had yet to realise how to fight that system.”²⁸ In the same speech Esau said that he “became aware that the students from the oppressed community, being more critical, had an important role to play in making other layers of our society more aware of the injustices in our land and the need to transform our society into one free from apartheid and exploitation.” In other words, in operating in the community, the idea was to conscientize people.

Shortly after, when UWC students found themselves on the run from the security police in 1973, they moved living places with ease, sometimes in musical chairs fashion. People “in the community” readily accommodated them, at risk to themselves. Charles Swanson, one of Bellville South’s community leaders, found that their children were “at risk”. A year on, he spirited his daughter Jean out of the country.

The post walk-off period proved a difficult for Isaacs and comrades. He found himself banned to Pietermaritzburg; security police detained Johnny Issel. Vernon Domingo went into exile almost immediately. Without a university to anchor them the remaining activists' work suffered. They did keep the matter of "community" alive, though.

In 1974 and -75, SASO UWC, having declined because of the 1973 debacle, made its move to reintegrate itself into UWC campus politics. They embarked on a conscientization programme. They roped in Thami Zani from Turfloop who led a revolutionary planning workshop. Coloured students attended the workshop and were "conscientized" into the need for revolution from below, that is, from community level.

Following on Freire, UWC activist-lecturer Ikey van der Rheede, speaking in 1976, put it that "the goal of education cannot simply be to know the 'object' or the world, but it also has to be to influence and change it."²⁹ But Van der Rheede suspected a distancing between "the [black] intellectuals and the masses of the people", an emerging elitism, and said "These intellectuals, who possess their knowledge because of the people, should be responsible and accountable to their communities. That is where they belong. Black intellectuals should dedicate themselves to their people and should endeavour to solve problems with them [...] In short, the responsibility of the black intellectual is not theorizing, but social action." Or action in concert with community, same thing! The "project", at least for Van der Rheede, sought a conversation between the elitist student body and the commoners in the community.

SQUATTER COMMUNITIES

An aerial photo would have shown that UWC in 1973-1976 was a relatively well-resourced oasis in a sandy shack land of poverty. Three sprawls of rusty shanties, communities without running water, electricity, roads, flush-toilets surrounded the university.

Having embraced the idea of community, and revolution for that matter, a fortuitous shift in human geography – the spill of a mass of Coloured and African people into greater Cape Town as of the mid 1960s and the attendant housing challenges – presented UWC students with a virtual laboratory for community activism. By 1975, 15,000 people lived in a squatter sprawl named Snake Park on the other side of the tracks from UWC; another 5,000 lived in nearby Werkgenot behind the university rugby fields. Snake Park housed mostly Coloured people, but many African crowded into it; Werkgenot housed only Africans.

Then there was also Plakkies Kamp on the eastern fringe of Bellville South where an uncounted number Coloureds lived. In attempting to alleviate the plight first of Plakkies Kamp (1974) and later of Werkgenot and Snake Park (1975), UWC students worked in soup kitchens funded by local Coloured entrepreneur Charles Swanson, owner of Swanie's Inn.³⁰ The Inn was a popular drink-and-dance place on Modderdam Road, Bellville South. Swanson and his student waiters and staff helped out at Plakkies Kamp providing soup and blankets. The students hurled themselves into these initiatives, learning more about the plight of one of the local communities, and steeling their resolve for activism in the process. In

these efforts, the students themselves were conscientized. Grootboom provides context, “When we left one mass meeting, we went into Bellville South. For the first time I really saw the conditions of our people. [...] I saw the squalor under which our people lived; the small matchbox houses. This reminded me of a song we sang at student gatherings, particularly one by Joan Baez – Little Boxes.”³¹

Students sometimes skipped lectures to work in the squatter camps around the university – Snake Park, Wekgenot, and in Modderdam later on (in 1976). When rumour reached lecture halls in August 1975 that Werkgenot was about to be bulldozed “hundreds of students” left lectures and “rushed to their aid”.³²

Ordinarily, Coloured people would have been eager to be separated from Africans. Not in 1973-77. The Coloured squatters who lived cheek by jowl with the Africans saw their struggles as the same. Student activist encouraged this black solidarity.

INTO THE COMMUNITY

From 1973 to 1976 UWC held a host of mass meetings, this as opposed to the entire of the 1960s when almost nothing happened. “The meetings did not only take place on campus. Off campus in suburbs like Athlone, Elsies River, Bonteheuwel, Belhar and Bellville, the students were conscientizing the community about the evils of the apartheid regime. These meetings were attended by people from all walks of life. An important factor that directed the movement in the Cape [...] were the Coloured students of the University of the Western Cape. They went out to their communities and informed [of] them what was happening at the university specifically and in South Africa on a broader scale.”³³ In Bellville South the students regularly held meetings in the Saaltjie on Fourie Street; the activist cell in Kuils River held public meetings in the St George’s Church on Sarepta Road and fundraisers (film shows) in the DRC Hall on Mission Road. House meetings took place at 60 Sarepta Road and 23 Gertrude Street in Sarepta. The students took their struggle into the community. One of the activists who embraced and funded the students in Sarepta was businessman James Flowers.

Francois van Wyk found that UWC students came to Bellville South High and conducted a number of “leerskole” after hours “to conscientize us”. This apparently happened in other Cape Flats schools also.

In 1975, UWC’s Social Sciences Society, headed by class of 1973 activists Joe Hartzenburg and Derek Gysman placed “community” squarely before the students. Referring to Shawco (a UCT student fundraising and welfare outfit), Gysman, a social work student, said: “The white universities are already working among our people, but what do we as black students at UWC do? We sit with folded arms and blame everything on the political situation in the country.”³⁴ The SSS itself had recently embarked on community projects on the Cape Flats and also invited several community experts to speak on campus. Other student bodies responded. The SRC headed by Howard Eybers, a tokkelok, started an Extra Lessons Scheme. Bellville South High, just around a clump of trees and a bend from the university, was one of the beneficiaries. The same issue of Unibel also reports that students also linked up with BABS (Build a Better Society) to make a contribution to “community development”. BABS had been

established in April 1973 and some UWC social work students did their practicals with this organization. Then, also in 1975, UWC students implemented an initiative to organize and uplift the Kewton community. This involved physical labour—neatening gardens and removing trash and debris.

In various ways students and community person thus link and cemented the university and “the community”.

Of Modderdam one researcher found: “Life [...] moved to a rhythm common to poor people. Weekdays, most men worked and women who did not wash, cook or clean for whites did their own housekeeping or visited the hospital. Saturdays were for drinking and shopping. Some men went off to the racetrack at Milnerton, a few miles away. Sundays were for church, the community meetings and visiting.”³⁵ A band of UWC students, led by Allan Liebenberg, attended these community meetings. The constructed dwellings, dug drainage furrows and generally helped the people.

INSTITUTIONAL UWC and COMMUNITY

Institutionally, UWC also reached into “community” so to speak. Firstly, as rector, Van der Ross bent the university toward the community. In an address to the incoming freshman class of 1975 he said, “It seems to me that we should begin to think of the day when the blessings of our institution should be extended to all students who wish to have access to them.” That meant students of the working class also. He added, “Waar die universiteit vir blankes soveel aandag bestee aan die keuringsproses wat daarop gemik is om kandidate wat ontoereikend toegerus is af te keur, moet on aksent liewer val op pogings om die leerlinge wat goeie potensiaal het, maar wat weens omgewingsstandighede nie die universiteit bereik nie, in te bring.”³⁶

Then UWC, having recognised a sub-culture of poverty on the Cape Flats, formed the Institute for Social Development, headed in 1976 by Edna van Harte. The institute had a development mandate. However, in the case of Modderdam it played an interventionist relief role also, providing food, support and advice. This came with the blessing of the rector Richard van der Ross, despite the fact that the students thought of him as conservative, as an apartheid puppet. The fact of the matter, however, is that Van der Ross had been involved in “community outreach” even before he reached UWC, and well before the students started including “community” in their protest agenda. The students’ community outreach and that of the university, although running along different but parallel trajectories, aimed at achieving the same goal – the uplift of community.

SYMPOSIUM 1976

When storm of Soweto (June 1, 1976 -) broke over South Africa, UWC students plunged into a series of symposia to analyse the South African socio-political situation. The weeklong symposia produced several reports, one of which was titled “The Role of the Black Student”. Vernon Balie led this particular group discussion. The report asserts in its opening line that “We belong to the community from whence we

sprung, and only thereafter are we students.” The report asserts that “The student is the most critical member of any community. This emanates from the knowledge he or she is acquiring. This knowledge enables him and her to identify irregularities in the system. And as such it is the responsibility of these critical students to explain to the people so that they can clearly see the irregularities, frauds, subterfuges and frustrations of the system that plague them all.” The paper calls on students to make sacrifices and to live in the community as a critic. “Our best chance of remaining organically part of the community is to jealously resist the temptation to grow away from our community because of our erudition, to guard against the odium of superiority which we sometimes unthinkingly take up vis-à-vis our working class communities, because that way we will never be an asset to our parents and others.”³⁷

A few days later, James Buys, speaking about “solidarity” asserted that in order to achieve “practical solidarity” it was imperative that the students involved “the whole community in our struggle”. In another report titled “The Individual and the Group”, fellow student Vernon Balie clarified, saying: “Our solidarity should be aimed at involving everyone from within our oppressed communities, even the non-critical person”.³⁸ He explained that if the government got hold of the non-critical persons, they could be turned against their own community.³⁹ He added that “Solidarity must also be inculcated amongst those in the broader community. We as students must stimulate our people to critical thought [that is, ‘conscientize’ them] so that they’d be able to further articulate whatever ideas we share with them.”

The obverse of Balie’s assertion must also be taken into account, of course. In an address to UWC students in August 1976, lecturer Ikey van der Rhee encouraged introspection among students, saying “We as a black community has in fact separated into two groups – the intellectuals and the masses of the people. These black intellectuals have arrogated themselves a privileged status, and in fact live worlds apart from the people. This self-distancing of the black intellectuals while they continue their pompous, yet meaningless conversation is counter-revolutionary.”⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

The students became so enamoured with notions of “black”, “community”, conscientization, critical consciousness, dialogue, and liberation theology that they did not see, perhaps, that these concepts (ideological tools) too had their dialectical antitheses. Just as well, such recognition may have retarded their forward movement. In fact, these concepts propelled them forward, more meaningfully than before, into engagements of self with black brothers and sisters (in the 1980s “comrades”) and headlong into confrontation and conflict with the oppressive other.

The “Durban Moment”, in as far as the strike wave is concerned, constituted a dramatic statement. Workers had arrived at the rendezvous of perceived and believed power. The rest is history: the successes of the union movement and the on-going struggle of the workers today. Students at UWC made their own visually stunning statement, albeit a few months later. In the period 1960 to 1972 they struggled to find their voice; in the process they found a new language also. And this new language, this vocabulary as tools of struggle, swept them into the national conversation and in fact made the struggle a truly national one.

The years 1973 through 1976 suggest that the conversation about the ways and means (black solidarity as political instrument) to achieve progressive change, the mobilization of self and “the people” out of fatalism (conscientization), and the making visible of the equal rights movement where it mattered (in the community) emanated from reflection, debate, and experimentation in the years before. The class of Henry Isaacs and of Leonardo Appies brought UWC into history, and by extension it brought Coloured Cape Town into history. They brought the “Durban Moment”, metaphorically speaking, into Cape Town.

This essay suggests that what made a difference in the Western Cape in the period 1973 through 1976 was the advent of black consciousness, especially the ready linguistic tools of the movement, viz. “black” ‘community” and “conscientization”, which replaced the Unity Movement political tools of boycott, non-collaboration and non-racialism as the sharp points of struggle.

The term community was especially easy to embrace because for the first time working class kids entered university in significant numbers.

While the Durban Moment constituted one series of dramatic rolling action with its own consequence and activist fruits, the Cape Town moment of awakened student activism and the finding of a new voice sustained itself throughout the 1970s and 1980s. That’s why Brian O’Connell could write that “UWC was magnificent in the struggle” and became “the largest producer of black (the political not race term) graduates in South Africa’s history, and why its history, in fact, parallels that of our nation: it liberated both politically and intellectually”.⁴¹

¹ Brian O’Connell, Foreword in Cornelius Thomas (ed.), *Finding Freedom in the Bush of Books* (Wendy’s Book Lounge, 2010), x.

² Ambrose George, Unpublished autobiography, typed manuscript, 1.

³ Fritz Klaaste interview of Bruce Simon, “George Botha: gelykheid tot die dood ons skei,” Radio Sonder Grense, 16 February 2012.

⁴ Desmond Demas, “The Power of Dignified Protest” in *Finding Freedom in the Bush of Books*, 22.

⁵ Vernon Domingo e-mail to Author, 10 September 2012.

⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* (Grove Press, 1967), 25.

⁷ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Continuum Publishing), 70-73.

⁸ Paulo Freire, *Education: The Practice of Freedom* (Writers and Readers Publishing, 1974), 43.

⁹ Interview of Allan Grootboom, 1 March 2012

¹⁰ SASO, Conference Issue 1972, 27.

¹¹ Interview of Jean Swanson-Jacobs, 25 September 2011.

¹² Conversation with James Matthews, 17 November 2010.

¹³ Allan Grootboom, “A Decade and More of Activism at UWC”, in *Finding Freedom in the Bush of Books*, 110.

¹⁴ *Unibel*, 1, 2 (Augustus 1975), 1.

¹⁵ Cornelius Thomas, *Cocktails of Liberty* (SA History Online and Vivia, 2008), 45.

¹⁶ Interview of Allan Grootboom, 1 March 2012

¹⁷ Grootboom, “A Decade and More of Activism at UWC” in *Finding Freedom in the Bush of Books*, 109.

¹⁸ Conversation with Kenny Mathews, Kimberley, 1 March 2012.

¹⁹ Andy Gradwell, “My Wild West Activism at UWC”, unpublished paper, undated.

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- ²⁰ Conversation with Kenny Mathews 1 March 2012.
- ²¹ Arthur Nortje, "Down at Bush – The Students", *New Nation*, July 1964.
- ²² Donald Woods, *Biko* (Penguin, 1987), 5 and 7.
- ²³ SASO Constitution.
- ²⁴ SASO Conference Bulletin, 1972b 27; SASO Conference Bulletin, 1973a: 15-16.
- ²⁵ Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like* (Oxford, 1978), 18
- ²⁶ Interview of Jean Swanson, September 2011.
- ²⁷ Julie Frederikse, Interview of Henry Isaacs, transcript, 10.
- ²⁸ Cecyl Esau, Accused No. 11 Cecil Esau [Speech from the Dock], Cape High Court, June 1987.
- ²⁹ Ikey van der Rheede, "Present Realities in Black Education", a symposium paper delivered at UWC, 5 August 1976.
- ³⁰ Interview of Godfrey Crowster, 21 April 2012.
- ³¹ Allan Grootboom, Handwritten notes, unprocessed Private Collection.
- ³² *Unibel*, 1, 2 (Augustus 1975), 6.
- ³³ Grootboom, "A Decade and More of Activism at UWC", in *Finding Freedom in the Bush of Books*, 110.
- ³⁴ *Unibel*, 1, 1 (June, 1975), 4.
- ³⁵ Andrew Silk, *A Shanty Town in South Africa: The Story of Modderdam* (Ravan Press, 1981), 9.
- ³⁶ UNISA, University of the Western Cape Accession, Dr Richard E Van der Ross, Address, "Facing the Future / Die Pad Vorentoe".
- ³⁷ Quoted in Thomas, *Cocktails of Liberty* (SA History Online & Vivlia, 2008), 56-57.
- ³⁸ Thomas, *Cocktails of Liberty*, 66.
- ³⁹ UWC-SRC, symposium report, Vernon Balie, "Die Individu en die Groep", unpublished mimeograph.
- ⁴⁰ Ikey van der Rheede, "Present Realities in Higher Education for Blacks," quoted in Cornelius Thomas, *Cocktails of Liberty*, 92.
- ⁴¹ Brian O'Connell, "Foreword", in Thomas (ed.), *Finding Freedom in the Bush of Books*, x-xi.