

The Colors of Resistance in Apartheid South Africa: Black Consciousness Poetry and the Racial Elusiveness of Wopko Jensma*

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POETRY IN A DIVIDED SOCIETY

Black Consciousness poetry – also widely known as Soweto poetry – has been called “the single most significant socio-literary event of the seventies South Africa.”¹ It took its impetus from the reaction to apartheid repression after the Sharpeville massacre of 1960, in which sixty-nine black workers protesting against the discriminatory pass-book law were shot by the South African police. The post-Sharpeville banning of the moderate African National Congress (ANC) and the radical Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), the imprisonment of their leaders, such as Nelson Mandela, Robert Sobukwe and Walter Sisulu, and the brutal repression that increasingly strengthened its grip on every aspect of black people’s lives, led to a deep disillusionment with the multiracial ideals of the ANC and the Liberal Party that had dominated opposition politics in South Africa. The exile of the liberation movements created a political vacuum that was occupied, a generation later, by the Black Consciousness Movement (further BC and BCM) activists, who had been schooled under the Bantu Education Act of 1953 designed to limit black people’s qualifications to manual skills. In 1968 Steve Biko, one of the few black scholarship students at the University of Natal, founded the black South African Students’ Organization (SASO) as a separate organization from the multiracial National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), and formulated Black Consciousness as a new awareness among the blacks of the need to break away from the coalition with white liberals. The BC slogan, “Black man, you are on your own”² reflected black dissatisfaction with the tendency of white liberals to ideologically dominate the anti-apartheid struggle, which, according to Biko, was undermining the prospect of racial equality:

The integration is a one-way course with the whites doing all the talking and the blacks doing all the listening. [...] [I]f by integration you understand [...] an

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¹ Chapman, “Introduction,” *Soweto Poetry*, 11.

² Biko, “Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity,” 91.

assimilation and acceptance of blacks into an already established set of norms and code of behavior set up and maintained by whites, then YES I am against it.³

Unlike anti-apartheid political organizations such as the ANC, BCM did not engage directly with white power, but was focused on refashioning the “mind of the oppressed,” based on Biko’s idea that “the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.”⁴ By appropriating the denigrating marker “black” and turning it into a positive identity, the movement responded to the failure of non-racial activism with its supposed universalism. The recovery of black people’s dignity and the fostering of racial solidarity were recognized by Biko as the necessary prerequisites for a non-racial South Africa in which both blacks and whites could be liberated. Black Consciousness, Biko emphasized, was therefore not to be understood as a divisive ideology of racial fundamentalism, but as a strategy in the “quest for a true humanity . . . where power politics have no place.”⁵ The movement took inspiration from various sources, including the West African Négritude movement as well as Christianity, as Daniel Magaziner has shown.⁶ Thus, while the Black Consciousness Movement did not admit whites among its ranks, it did admit Coloureds (South African term for mixed-raced) and Indians whose oppression defined them politically as “black.”⁷

Black Consciousness poetry, which first started appearing in the late-1960s in the white-published literary magazines such as *Ophir*, *The Classic and Purple Renoster*, was the product of the time’s urgency in its central concern with the recovery of the humanity of the black person who had been turned into a unit of labor by apartheid’s dehumanizing program. Written in English, the language of the school education of black South Africans, it enjoyed mass popularity in the 1970s and 1980s especially in live performances at township community meetings, political rallies, funerals and memorial services, as the imaginative medium of the Black Consciousness Movement, and became the rallying cry for black solidarity.

BC poetry has often represented itself (and been represented) as a radical break from the European Romantic notions of poetry as an ego-centric, self-reflexive meditation on the individual’s social alienation that had dominated white South

³ Biko, “Black Souls in White Skins?,” 24.

⁴ Biko, “The Definition of Black Consciousness,” 65.

⁵ Biko, “Black Consciousness and the Quest,” 90.

⁶ Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets*.

⁷ Among prominent colored and Indian members of the Movement were, for example, the journalist and author Don Mattera, the poets Christopher van Wyk and James Matthews, and the cleric Rubin Phillip.

African writing. The BC poet sees himself not in opposition to society, but as speaking *for* his community. Through describing a shared sociological condition, Oswald Mtshali explained, he sought to inspire his fellow blacks “to seek their true identity as a single solid group.”⁸ He asks rhetorically: “[i]s there anything like black poetry in Southern Africa, as divorced from Jewish poetry, Afrikaans poetry, and English poetry? Are there ethnic poetry differences in our society? My answer to that is a big ‘yes.’”⁹ In the words of Siphso Sepamla, “[w]e must not pander to the whims of white tastes.”¹⁰ In countless essays, comments and interviews, BC poets and their Afrocentric critics insist on an ethnic particularism and exceptionalism of BC poetry inspired by the spirit of the ancestors, African people’s mythic connection with nature, and an authentic black culture into which British and Dutch colonialism were an illegitimate intrusion.¹¹ Simultaneously, BC poets claim a historical necessity to redefine poetry not as an art-object, but as a tool, or indeed a weapon.¹² Form became secondary to content, the truth of the image and the force of the statement. The rejection of European poetic forms became the necessary first step for African poets’ creative and political emancipation. As Mothobi Mutloatse famously wrote,

We are going to pee, spit and shit on literary convention before we are through;
we are going to kick and pull and push and drag literature into the form we prefer.
We are going to experiment and probe and not give a damn what the critics have
to say. Because we are in search of our true selves – undergoing self-discovery as
a people.¹³

Yet, BC poetry did not always challenge the European tradition in the ways it professed. On the contrary, as David Attwell and others have shown, BC poets such as Oswald Mtshali, Mongane Serote, Mafika Gwala, and Siphso Sepamla were deeply indebted to English Romantics and Modernists such as Wordsworth, Auden, Blake, and Ted Hughes, in their form, voice and imagery, in addition to the influences by the Harlem Renaissance poets.¹⁴ The reason for this is that the European lyric tradition provided the BC poet with a contemplative voice that recuperated the agency and autonomy of the black human subject dehumanized

⁸ Barnett, “Oswald Mtshali Interviewed by Ursula Barnett (1973),” 100.

⁹ Mtshali, “Black Poetry in Southern Africa: What it Means,” 105.

¹⁰ Sepamla, “The Black writer in South Africa Today: Problems and Dilemmas,” 119.

¹¹ See Sole, Mpahlele and Moodley.

¹² van Wyk, *A Messgae in the Wind*, 1982

¹³ Mutloatse, “Introduction.”

¹⁴ See David Attwell, “Lyric and Epic” and Michelle Decker, “Entangled Poetics.”

by a racist ideology and became a vehicle for the emergence of a modern African self: “[t]he lyric tradition [...] facilitated the affirmation of selfhood that was at the heart of the movement’s social programme.”¹⁵

BC’s strategy of radically differentiating itself from “white poetry” was, psychologically as much as politically, a type of “survival mechanism” under the pressure of apartheid; at the same time, however, it problematically essentialized and mystified blackness. The questions that need to be asked are whether this affirmation of Black selfhood, written predominantly by male poets, offered the same agency to black women; and also whether it succeeded in articulating a new South African national identity in which, as Biko envisioned, both blacks and whites could be included. As I am already suggesting by posing these rhetorical questions, BC poetry is ridden with paradoxes, omissions and generalizations that arise from its tendency to construct a national identity through gendered and racialized paradigms. Indeed, despite its claims of inclusiveness, the voice of BC poetry does not speak for all; it excludes many, notably black women and whites, from its imagined national community. This process of erasure, I must emphasize, is not deliberate; nevertheless, it is deeply embedded in BC imagination and works in interrelated ways. As I have argued elsewhere, by insisting on a paradigmatic “Black experience,” BC poetry denies black women a particularity of oppression based on both race and gender. This homogenous portrayal of black people as victims is necessary in order to construct white people as a monolithic oppressor. Simultaneously, by celebrating “traditional culture” as the source of the Black identity that whites have no access to, and the woman as its embodiment, BC poetry creates silences about the ways women are oppressed by tradition. As a result, BC poetry constructs Black selfhood at the cost of denying agency to the black female subject, and an ethical speaking position to the white subject.

A South African poet whose work and life radically deconstructs race as well as the presumed difference between black and white identity, experience and poetics was Wopko Jensma, who even before his premature death became a cult figure, considered by some to be the “voice of the South African nation.”¹⁶ Jensma’s poetry shows that black people were not the only ones who suffered under apartheid and that the construction of blackness by Black Consciousness poetry as an essential identity had the unintended effect of accepting apartheid’s racial categories. As my analysis will show, the poet’s rejection of these categories, at the cost of losing his “white privilege,” was a singular gesture of solidarity with the black other, an ethical position of being open to strangers, at the risk of becoming a stranger himself.

¹⁵ Attwell, “Lyric and Epic,” 161.

¹⁶ Alvarez-Pereyre, *The Poetry of Commitment in South Africa*, 111.

BLACKNESS AS AN ONTOLOGICAL CONDITION: SEROTE, SEPAMLA, GWALA, VAN WYK

Often retrospectively considered the leading poet of the BC poetic movement is Mongane Serote (born in 1944), a former ANC activist in exile.¹⁷ In 1969, Serote, a Soweto reporter and an aspiring poet, was sentenced to nine months in solitary confinement under the Terrorism Act, before being released without charge. In 1973 he would write: “[t]here are two distinct worlds in this South Africa. The gutter-trapped black world, and the opinionated, arrogant, racist white world. No crossing the fence yet, life is too short for that.”¹⁸

Serote’s highly poetic imagery often rests on the juxtaposition of blackness and whiteness, an imagery expressing the experience of living in a society where all human rights have been taken away from the black people by the white system. Apartheid’s racist signifier “black” is re-appropriated as positive. Blackness is often associated with night, whose shadows protect blacks from *baas* (boss), or the police, and when families are at home together: “Night; / Night, black night of home, / That falls gentle like sweet music of a horn.”¹⁹ “Do not fear Baas. / It’s just that I appeared / And our faces met / In this black night that’s like me.”²⁰ Whiteness, on the other hand, is typically associated with death, bones, winter, dryness, and even limestone whitewash used as a disinfectant:

it is a dry white season
 dark leaves don’t last, their brief lives dry out
 and with a broken heart they dive down gently headed for the earth
 not even bleeding.
 it is a dry white season brother,
 only the trees know the pain as they still stand erect
 dry like steel, their branches dry like wire,
 indeed, it is a dry white season
 but seasons come to pass.²¹

Serote’s color-coded imagery evokes an emotionally sterile environment, devoid of human warmth and life-generating love. In this cold, white, infertile environment, the dark leaves have brief lives. Their deaths are quick. Significantly,

¹⁷ Mzamane, “Introduction,” 1.

¹⁸ Serote, “The Nakasa World,” 111.

¹⁹ Idem, “Manchild Talking to the Night,” 41–42.

²⁰ Idem, “An Actual Dialogue,” 1.

²¹ Idem, “For Don M. – Banned,” 58.

the poem's transparent reference to apartheid South Africa is written in a lyrical form that takes advantage of metaphor, alliteration, and rhythm, as well as modernist minimalism, defamiliarization (whiteness as negative) and word play ("dry white season" as a reference to both the "dry season" of the African climate as well as the "white season" of the European winter).

In "A Poem on Black and White," Serote explores the origins of inter-racial hatred, pointing out that terror breeds terror and hatred. By reversing the situation involving a white policeman and a black child and thus imagining the unimaginable, he points out the bestiality of apartheid's violence:

If i pour petrol on a white child's face
and give flames the taste of his flesh
it won't be a new thing
i wonder how i will feel when his eyes pop
[...]
i understand alas i do understand
the rage of a whiteman pouring petrol on a black child's face
setting it alight and shooting him in a Pretoria street²²

In many ways, Serote invented a new aesthetic that others would follow and imitate. In their expression, however, the black-and-white imagery is presented through the epic form that is better suited for its documentary purposes. In Mafika Gwala's "into the dark: 1975," dusk in the township, "a ghetto sundown," is seen as "the darkness of hope," covering the black urban guerrilla with its shadows, and juxtaposed with "blood stained from whitepolicy murderers":

i wait for the dark
embrace the shadows
guerrilla into the darkness of hope
confer with the nightfall²³

By describing a recognizable, shared sociological condition – township matchbox houses, the sirens of police vans, bulldozers that arrive to flatten slums, jails and detention centers, babies shot on mothers' backs – BC poets, much like the fiction writers Alex La Guma, Mtutuzeli Matshoba, Can Themba, Lewis Nkosi, Bloke Modisane and Ezekiel Mphahlele, seek to inspire common identity and political

²² Serote, "A Poem on Black and White," 55.

²³ Gwala, "Into the dark: 1975," 24.

consciousness. The black poet, Oswald Mtshali argues, is a witness who reports on reality just like the journalist and the documentary writer:

[B]lack poetry depicts the black man's life as it is shaped by the laws that govern him. He has no hand in the making of these laws, but he must abide by them. Black poetry is the mirror that reflects the black man's aspirations, his hopes and his disappointments, his joys and sorrows, his loves and hates.²⁴

Mtshali's "Nightfall in Soweto" is typical of his poetry that describes the all-pervasive fear of the ghetto at night when policemen come unannounced to arrest and execute their victims:

I am the victim.
 I am slaughtered
 every night in the streets.
 I am cornered by the fear
 gnawing at my timid heart;
 in my helplessness I languish.
 Man has ceased to be man
 Man has become beast
 Man has become prey.
 [...]
 Where is my refuge?
 Where am I safe?
 Not in my matchbox house
 Where I barricade myself against nightfall.²⁵

The poem emphasizes that South Africa is not a home to black people, who can be randomly slaughtered anytime. Similarly, Siphso Sepamla's poems often evoke the gothic atmosphere of the black ghetto satiated with unknown terror that occurs randomly and without warning. Monsters, seen through a child's imagination, are eerily revealed to be real policemen, military tanks and soldiers, creating a nightmarish landscape of horror and violence. In "A Child Dies," a "towering giant" pounds a black child to death:

the child ran and ran
 until he fell smack

²⁴ Mtshali, "Black Poetry in Southern Africa," 106.

²⁵ Mtshali, "Nightfall in Soweto," 42.

into the hands of a towering giant
 he was grabbed
 he was hurled to the ground
 like grain
 he was punded and pounded
 with a gun-butt²⁶

These are important testimonies to the violent oppression blacks suffered during apartheid. The BC poet wants to bear testimony of the “black experience,” hidden behind apartheid’s euphemisms such as “Bantu education,” “separate development,” “homelands,” “plural relations,” and “dialogue.” The condition of being Black in South Africa – a bizarre, semi-twilight existence – needed to be called by its true names by those who directly experienced it, BC poets claimed, since its horrors were unimaginable to those living outside. If, in 1963, the *Drum* magazine writer Nat Nakasa still believed that “[t]here are, obviously, exceptions like Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer and others in whose work the African is represented as something larger than a functional being, something more than a lesser being lacking in some of the dimensions that go to make a whole man,”²⁷ in 1980, Christopher van Wyk would claim, “[i]t is true that only blacks, not even writers like Nadine Gordimer, however compassionate she might be about the plight of blacks, can authentically portray the ‘black condition.’”²⁸ In his poem “In Detention,” he parodies *ad absurdum* the variety of absurd lies that were given as explanation of the death of tortured political prisoners:

He fell from the ninth floor
 He hanged himself
 He slipped on a piece of soap while washing
 He hanged himself
 He slipped on a piece of soap while washing
 He fell from the ninth floor
 He hanged himself while washing
 He slipped from the ninth floor
 He hung from the ninth floor

²⁶ Sepamla, “A Child Dies,” 2.

²⁷ Nakasa, “Writing in South Africa,” 36.

²⁸ Dangor, “Interview with Christopher van Wyk,” 133. This comment must be seen in the context of Gordimer’s increasingly radical anti-apartheid position, as she saw it, and her rejection of the marker “liberal”: “Do not call me a liberal. Liberal is a dirty word.” See Michael Ratcliffe, “A South African Radical Exulting in Life’s Chaotic Variety.”

He slipped on the ninth floor while washing
 He fell from a piece of soap while slipping
 He hung from the ninth floor
 He washed from the ninth floor while slipping
 He hung from a piece of soap while washing.²⁹

Speaking from behind a barrier of legislation that made contact between blacks and whites illegal beyond that of employer and employee, the BC poet wants to convey the “black experience” that often challenges poetic imagination. As Gwala argues,

Black writers do have a black experience. Black writers did not choose to grow up in ghettos like Cato Manor, Sophiatown, Clermont, Alexandra, or Duncan Village. Neither do they choose to be pushed into so-called townships and into bundustans. This is a sociological factor that black writers cannot avoid. Inevitably they have the human right to claim a sociological imagination that challenges the sociological locale.³⁰

According to Motloutse,

We as black people are all oppressed and at the mercy of the government. So how can we as black people be different from one another? [...] It is called Black Experience, not just black literature. It is not the same thing as white literature, which is of privilege, unlike that of the black writer, which is of the underdog.³¹

BC poetry’s evocation here of apartheid’s extreme socially separatist effects is broadly valid and there is no denying that South African blacks as a group suffered from apartheid oppression. Yet, the homogenized representation of blacks as victims and whites as aggressive oppressors lacks nuance and objectivity. Many whites were allies of the anti-apartheid movement and of BC poets, whose poetry collections were published by the white-owned publishing houses Renoster Books and Ad. Donker. In 1973, Serote accepted the Ingrid Jonker prize named in memory of the Afrikaner poet who wrote in protest against her own ethnic group. Also, as has been acknowledged, not all blacks were oppressed to the same degree, depending on their class, gender, and geographic location, and some

²⁹ Van Wyk, “In Detention.”

³⁰ Gwala, “Black Writing Today,” 171.

³¹ Mutloutse, “White Literature Is Empty, It Lacks the Black Experience,” 4 July 1980, quoted in Kelwyn Sole, “Culture, Politics and the Black Writer,” 48.

could be said to have benefited from the system.³² Black Consciousness argues for the necessity of overlooking such internal differences for the sake of unity. The consistently male subject of Mtshali's statements points to the tendency of BC poetry to make masculinity normative in the discussion of "black experience." Numerous women authors, such as Ellen Kuzwayo, Lauretta Ngcobo, Miriam Tlali or Sindiwe Magona, have shown that black women's apartheid oppression was by degree worse due to the gender-biased apartheid laws. At the same time, many whites fought with their voices for the sake of a non-racial South Africa and faced police persecution as a result. By portraying whites only as ruthless policemen and bosses, BC poetry implicitly allows white people no ethical position to speak from. It is this kind of ethnic absolutism that Alan Paton, the last president of the banned Liberal Party, feared when he asked rhetorically in 1971 whether it was "expected of white liberals to leave the country; keep silent for ever more; be trained as guerilla fighters or just lie down and die."³³ Paton was trying to point out that Black Consciousness might become "a refusal to believe, on principle, that any white man can speak the truth."³⁴

The issue I want to bring up here is not that BC poetry is silent about the small number of blacks who (perhaps) benefited from the system, but that the belief that "there are no whites who are oppressed"³⁵ and the depiction of unsurpassable barriers between blacks and whites unfortunately plays into apartheid's efforts at isolating people from each other, preventing cross-racial dialogue, solidarity and a united protest, but above all empathy – an ability to imagine another's experience.

According to Mtshali, poetry must mirror reality and stem from personal experience:

A poet [...] cannot contrive his subject matter or themes. He must know what he is writing about. If he does not, he will come up with something unnatural, unrealistic and downright phony. Only a Jewish poet can write about barmitzvah. Only an Afrikaner poet can describe Nagmaal. I as a black man can tell you how I slaughter a black goat for my ancestors.³⁶

Such insistence on the documentary nature of literature and the direct relationship between ethnicity (understood here as "culture") and the authority

³² See Sole, "Culture, Politics and the Black Writer."

³³ Anonymous, "Spread of Black Consciousness," 49.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Mofokeng, "Mdali Walkout on Whites at Meeting," 23 January 1980, quoted in Sole, "Culture, Politics and the Black Writer," 48.

³⁶ Mtshali, "Black Poetry in Southern Africa," 106.

to describe experience is highly problematic, since it effectively denies the ethical possibility of crossing over to the racial other through imaginative literature. In a society where contact between blacks and whites is stripped to the barest, dehumanized, mechanical relationship between a master and a servant, imagination can however provide an important opportunity to connect ethically with the oppressed. Such literary trespassing beyond the color lines can prove to be a powerful tool for sabotaging apartheid's systems of power, corroding its ideological structures from unexpected positions.

BECOMING BLACK: THE POETRY OF WOPKO JENSMa

A case in point is Wopko Jensma (1939–1999?), a white South African poet who in his poetry managed to breach the mental barrier between white and black through its poetic idiom, diction and themes indistinguishable from BC poetry. Jensma's unique poetry openly acknowledges inspiration by diverse influences: French surrealism, especially Apollinaire; Dadaism, especially Hans Arp and Marcel Duchamp; the modernist poetry of the Czech poet Miroslav Holub and the Beat Poets; as well as Black Consciousness poetry. Despite being inspired by the poetic idiom of BC and expressing its extreme alienation and mental splitting, Jensma challenges its Black vs. White binary imagination. His profound solidarity with black South Africans is demonstrated by his unusual, subversive, self-othering gesture of having himself legally reclassified as Black, and above all by his mastery of the social and linguistic idiom of a wide variety of people. Jensma's poetry mixes English, Afrikaans, Tswana, French, German, and *tsotsitaal* (hybrid urban slang) without pretension or display, a testimony to his restless and often illegal movement across the borders of cities, ghettos, "group areas," and countries, and his deep, clandestine attraction to other cultures.

A regular contributor to the semi-underground magazine *Ophir*, Wopko Jensma became popular with his readers for his agile, playful poems written in truncated, hybrid township argot, in rhythms of jazz or Negro spirituals, expressing a powerful Black Consciousness that invests hope in black people's solidarity and creativity even as it mourns its dead. In the poem below, negative associations of death and torture (as thematized also in van Wyk's poem "In Detention") are overridden with the simple joy of living. Its imitation of Afro-American slang and swing-like rhythm and repetition evokes African American popular music:

did you tumble down steps?
 did you slip on a piece 'f soap?
 What the hell did you do?

Tell me you died ‘f tb
 ma people, god got ya covered
 Let’s rail away, all stoned
 ‘f winin’n dinin all day
 gonna be great in south africa³⁷

Mafika Gwala remembers Jensma thus:

Of the main contributors to *Ophir*, black readers loved to read the poet-artist Wopko Jensma. I enjoyed Wopko; so did everybody with whom I discussed poetry of the day. Wopko’s observations of the apartheid scenario were brilliant, and very open. Wopko Jensma. For a long time I thought he was black... So when I met Wopko one evening, edged against his self-withdrawal, I could only think of one thing: his white world was killing him, as if out to destroy him. Perhaps he had refused for too long to be the white he was expected to be.³⁸

Indeed, as Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre has written, “before seeing his photograph, one could picture him as a Cape Malay, or a Tswana from a township where everyone speaks Afro-American slang, or an Afrikaner who has broken with Afrikanerdom, or an English-speaking South African who has spent his childhood among black people.”³⁹ Yet he is “white.” In a country as compartmentalized and divided as South Africa, Jensma seems to have achieved the impossible: discarding the identity of an Afrikaner and rejecting apartheid racial categories. According to Michael Gardiner, “It is evident [...] that Jensma speaks not for the other but as the other.”⁴⁰ He cites Jensma’s close friend Peter Horn:

Wopko’s identification with the oppressed is not a “feat”: he is forced into it by circumstances of his life and by the make-up of his society. He does not speak the language of the discarded, rejected and oppressed because of a pretended change of skin pigmentation but because he has experienced being discarded, rejected and oppressed.⁴¹

Jensma was born in an Afrikaner farming family and had an unhappy childhood due to his mother’s alcoholism.⁴² He left his Boer background behind by studying

³⁷ Jensma, “In Memoriam Ben Zwane,” 33.

³⁸ Gwala, “Writing As a Cultural Weapon,” 41.

³⁹ Alvarez-Pereyre, *The Poetry of Commitment*, 111.

⁴⁰ Gardiner, “‘Onder Ander’: Wopko Jensma’s Poetry in Afrikaans,” 50.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴² Sheik, “‘I feel like hollerin,’” 237.

fine arts and became a recognized graphic artist. When visiting Swaziland he fell in love with a Swazi woman and married her, upon which his family disowned him. Because of his interracial marriage, illegal under apartheid laws, he was unable to return to South Africa and went to live in Botswana, where the couple had three children. However, his marriage deteriorated and in 1971 he eventually returned to South Africa, leaving his family behind. At this time, he conversationally played around with the idea of having himself reclassified as Black in a gesture of solidarity with the disenfranchised black people.⁴³ Enjoying the confusion about his racial identity, he would often tell people that his mother was Ethiopian and his father was Egyptian.⁴⁴ He was diagnosed with schizophrenia, which incapacitated his artistic skills and eventually turned him into a vagrant. Becoming the state's responsibility and receiving a disability fund, he spent the last years of his life in a Salvation Army shelter in Johannesburg, where he was last seen in 1993, aged 54.⁴⁵ His disappearance from society has led to endless speculations by fans about his whereabouts.⁴⁶ While some believe that his schizophrenia led him to commit suicide, or that he was murdered, others imagine that he left the country to live abroad under a different name.

Jensma's disappearance can be read as his ultimate gesture of solidarity with the hundreds of blacks who disappeared without trace during apartheid after engaging in "subversive political activity." His diverse poetry, published in *Sing for Our Execution* (1973), *Where White is the Colour, Where Black is the Number* (1974), and *I Must Show You My Clippings* (1977) expresses the alienation, loneliness, depression and racial identity crisis of a man who cannot identify with the humanity of his fellow people. In his poem "I Am Tired," Jensma rejects a white materialist lifestyle out of solidarity with blacks, while he also articulates the terrible position of the oppressor who is ridden with guilt:

i dont want that suburban house
 i dont want a second car
 a swimming pool a lawn a boring Sunday
 no, none of that
 i am tired, so very tired
 tired of the hate stare

⁴³ According to Ayub Sheikh Jensma actually had himself reclassified, which it not true. The authorities at the time would never have reclassified an individual such as Jensma as "Black." (Sheikh, "I Feel Like Hollerin But the Town Is Too Small": A Biographical Study of Wopko Jensma," 248.)

⁴⁴ Ibid., 246.

⁴⁵ McDonald, *The Literature Police*, 298.

⁴⁶ Anonymous, "An Encounter with Wopko Jensma."

tired of broken telephones
 tired of non-white entrances
 tired of being a burden
 i am tired, tired of hating⁴⁷

Jensma realizes that violence damages the humanity of the perpetrator even more than that of the victim; it is the evil lurking within that creates that existential *angst* (or Christian guilt) in Jensma's poems. Through the implied theme of Cain and Abel – the two brothers of whom one kills the other and then tries to hide it – he speaks in the first person, both as a murderer and as a victim, to reveal that mutually damaging violence and the schizophrenia of a society living all the time by two codes of conduct:

i got a gash in my head
 blood spurts from it
 i must cut my head off
 i must hide myself
 no one must see me do it
 cause the blood is my guilt⁴⁸

Jensma embraces the responsibility for that crime through his extraordinary poetic idiom, with its distinctive rhetorical strategies and experimental textures. With its swing and jive rhythms, metonymic employment of blackness and whiteness, irreverence for Christian symbols, and allusions to police beatings, solitary detentions, torture, illegal shebeens, and the heroes, slogans and poets of the Black Consciousness Movement, Jensma's poetry displays a powerful Black Consciousness. The poem below, celebrating the "children of Sharpeville" in the style of a Negro spiritual, points to the perversion of "truth" and Christian ethics by the racist South Africa:

we the children of Sharpeville
 long since washed clean
 of bloodstains
 have gathered together
 and are ready to meet him
 ...

⁴⁷ Jensma, "kantie, hy's on the binge or how to make a horse of yourself without really trying," 17.

⁴⁸ Jensma, "Lopsided Cycle," 14.

we lift up our hands in thanksgiving
 for the truth that is shown to us
 as we are gathered here for the last time
 around the sacrificial altar
 preparing to sing praise
 waiting to clap our hands
 for him
 who is coming to kill us again⁴⁹

However, Jensma's heroes are not only South African artists and activists, but also European Dada artists, such as Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp, and Marcel Duchamp, whose anti-war politics led them to reject the prevailing standards in art, and to whom he pays homage with his elusive Dadaist riddles that refuse to yield to the reader ("amatjrblackaf bludybalshitirboenwhitrock...").⁵⁰ Jensma's poetry creates extraordinary, grotesque worlds in which the brutal reality of South Africa is transformed into a circus or a fantastical, pornographic, tragi-comic carnival:

top pop star tells all!
 porno actress reveals all!
 minced meat
 t'do? be? doo
 mr noah von ark's shady carnival
 mrs von ark's soft lined fur
 Say-say say't
 O say't now

Amakaladi: tjarra, tjarra ad infinitum
 Kaffir: amaboen, amaboen ad infinitum
 Amaboen: kaffir, kaffir ad infinitum
 Tjarra: amakaladi-ladiii ad infinitum
 Curryball: a-hmm sanctus dominus dei...
 :ad lib al together now:
 amatjrblackf bludybalshitirboenwhitrock⁵¹

⁴⁹ Jensma, "We Children," 76.

⁵⁰ Jensma, "The pointless objects riddle," 73.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Jensma's kaleidoscopic poetry transgresses the frontiers that apartheid had wanted to keep intact –those of cultures, races, European and African literary traditions, sanity and madness, and even class. It proves that, as Michelle Decker has argued, African and European poetic forms in South Africa were entangled just like black and white worlds.⁵² His ability to pass as Black – as Gwala's memory testifies – shakes up the categories of blackness and whiteness that Black Consciousness and apartheid had both so invested in (albeit with a different aim) and directly denies the statement by the BC poet, anthologist and activist Mthobisi Mutloatse that

Being African is not a game of pick and choose. It is something deeper, more religious and cultural than a mere utterance. It is a way of life: a ritual. Being African is an ancestral thing, without whom [sic], one's Africanness is meaningless.⁵³

Moreover, Jensma insists that the reader does the same, performs that gesture of empathy in understanding the world out of which he writes. In Jensma, this Levinasian empathy and openness to other races, ethnicities, cultures, classes – as well as frames of mind – can lead to freedom. In this sense, Jensma's poetry expresses an inclusive "human consciousness" and anticipates the ideal of the "rainbow nation" invoked after 1990 by Desmond Tutu. As Peter Wilhelm wrote about Jensma in 1973: "Some have displayed uncertainty about his racial/religio/political background: after all, in the land of separate development, to have no official identity, to slot into no orthodox groove, is a very strange, disturbing thing [...]. He is a terrifying, new sort of human. He is the first South African."⁵⁴ It is a cruel irony of fate that Jensma did not live to see the creation of the new democratic South Africa and the election of Nelson Mandela for president in 1994. Unlike Mongane Serote, who after 1994 has deservedly served on various committees for arts and culture, Jensma was unable to contribute to the building of a new post-apartheid culture. Although his legacy is remembered in various poetry anthologies as well as a Facebook page and a website dedicated to the appreciation of his poetry and art,⁵⁵ it has not been given an official state-authorized stamp, as, for example, the legacy of Ingrid Jonker (1933–65), another Afrikaner anti-apartheid poet who, like Jensma, had a tragic end. This might have to do with Jensma's elusiveness and ambiguity, which was precisely his weapon against totalitarianism.

⁵² Decker, "Entangled Poetics: Apartheid South African Poetry between Politics and Form."

⁵³ Mutloatse, "Africans All."

⁵⁴ Cited in Stephen Gray, "Losing His Head: The Poetry of Wopko Jensma and His Reputation," 36.

⁵⁵ See McGregor, "I write you from afar" – Wopko Jensma enigmatic poet of Africa."

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