

A Native of Nowhere:

The Life of South African Journalist Nat Nakasa, 1937-1965

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This article examines the life and work of South African journalist Nat Nakasa (1937-1965), a writer for the popular news magazine Drum, the first black columnist for the Johannesburg newspaper the Rand Daily Mail, and the founding editor of the African literary journal The Classic. He has long lurked on the fringes of South African historiography, never playing more than a bit part in studies of early apartheid-era journalism, literature and intellectual culture. Indeed, the specifics of his life have been overshadowed in both popular memory and academic study by the potent symbolism of his death, frequently evoked as a marker of the destruction wrought on black intellectuals by National Party rule. Nakasa committed suicide in exile in the United States at the age of only 28. Drawing on interviews, newspapers and magazines, memoirs, government surveillance documents, and personal papers, this article aims to fill in but also to complicate this legacy. In a broader sense, it also seeks to show how biographical narrative can be employed to cut across time periods, movements, perspectives, and geography, providing an important reminder that every history is peopled by the sprawled and frequently contradictory lives of individuals.

Introduction

On a warm July morning in 1965, South African writer Nat Nakasa stood facing the window of a friend's seventh floor apartment in Central Park West.¹ In the distance he could likely make out the spire of the Empire State Building, a sharp reminder of just how far he was from home. Less than a year earlier, Nakasa had taken an 'exit permit' from the apartheid government – a one-way ticket out of the country of his birth – and come to Harvard University on a journalism fellowship. Now he was caught in a precarious limbo, unable to return to South Africa but lacking citizenship in the United States. He was, he wrote, a 'native of nowhere ... a stateless man [and] a permanent wanderer'.² Standing in that New York City apartment building, he faced the alien city. Then he jumped. He was 28 years old.³

1 For her indefatigable and patient advisement on this project, I would like to extend my deepest thanks to Karin Shapiro. Thanks are due as well to Heather Acott, Janet Ewald, Gail Gerhart, Alyssa Granacki, Brooke Hartley, Snayha Nath, Alan Venable, Andrew Walker, and especially to Rose Filler and Karlyn Forner for their valuable comments and support on various iterations of this project. I am also grateful to Thivhulayiwe Mutavhatsindi, who copied portions of the Nathaniel Nakasa Papers at the University of the Witwatersrand Historical Papers Collection for me and Kate Ryan, who translated Nakasa's police file from Afrikaans to English. Finally, I wish to acknowledge the generous financial support of the U.S. Department of State's Fulbright program for additional research conducted between September and November 2011.

2 Nat Nakasa, 'Native of Nowhere', *The Classic*, 1, 1 (1963), 73.

3 Matthew Keane, "'I Can Feel My Grin Turn to a Grimace': From Sophiatown Shebeens to the Streets of Soweto on the Pages of *Drum*, *The Classic*, *New Classic*, and *Staffrider*' (Unpublished M.A. thesis, George Mason University, 2010), 128. Thanks to Matthew for correcting my previous misconceptions – and the historical record more generally – about the timing of Nakasa's death.

Nakasa's suicide stunned a wide circle of writers and artists in South Africa and the United States. Musician Hugh Masekela, who attended the young journalist's funeral, remembered the event as seminal in his own exile experience, the moment when he first had 'the realization that we all might die overseas.'⁴ Particularly jarring to Masekela and others close to Nakasa was that his death came on the heels of a brisk and markedly successful career. In the decade preceding his suicide, he rose to become a senior writer for South Africa's most circulated black news magazine, *Drum*, served as the first black columnist at a prominent white newspaper, the *Rand Daily Mail*, and founded a literary journal, *The Classic*, to showcase African writing. By the time he was in his mid-twenties, he had been published in the *New York Times* and offered a scholarship to hone his craft in the Ivy League. But as for so many South Africans of his generation, leaving his homeland was not simply a matter of deciding to go. It was also a matter of deciding never to come back. Not yet thirty years old, Nakasa had to look into his future and say that being legally barred from his homeland was a price worth paying to see the world beyond its borders.

Drawing on source material for a full-length study of Nakasa, this article examines the trajectory of a man whose life and legacy are intimately connected to two of the most buzz-worthy terms in modern South African history – apartheid and exile. It does so, however, in ways that resist the narrow band of emotional experiences that these words are frequently made to evoke. In large part because of how Nakasa died – far from home and stripped of his South African citizenship – his life is frequently distilled into a simplistic tale of the National Party's crushing defeat of black talent in the 1960s. But close study reveals a far more complex narrative. For if apartheid ultimately forced Nakasa out of South Africa, the system also lent his life and writing the urgency and dark wit that defined both, pushing him constantly to clear ambitious professional hurdles before the laws and policies of National Party rule could catch up. And if exile provided the impetus for his suicide, it was also a dazzling educational and social opportunity for a black South African who had never attended university or travelled outside of southern Africa. Far from being static, two-dimensional evils, apartheid and exile were fluid and multi-faceted experiences for Nakasa that cannot be easily or starkly categorized.

In scholarly works about early apartheid-era journalism, literature and intellectual culture, Nakasa's name is sometimes evoked to demonstrate the corrosion of the black artistic community in Johannesburg or to provide a clever quote about black urban life. But he has long lurked on the fringes of this historiography, never given more than a bit part in the wider narrative.⁵ This essay begins to redress that silence, and in doing so complicates both the history of the so-called 'Sophiatown generation' of artists and writers and the narrative of early resistance to apartheid. Biography

4 Interview with Hugh Masekela, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 12 October 2010.

5 Historical and literary studies that provide a brief mention of Nat Nakasa include Peter Benson, "'Border Operators': Black Orpheus and the Genesis of Modern African Art and Literature", *Research in African Literatures* 14, 4 (1983), 431-73; Michael Chapman, *The Drum Decade: Stories from the 1950s* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1989); Walter Ehmeir, 'Publishing South African Literature in English in the 1960s', *Research in African Literatures*, 26, 1 (Spring 1995), 111-131; Ulf Hannerz, 'Sophiatown: The View from Afar', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 20, 2 (June 1994), 181-193; Mike Nicol, *A Good Looking Corpse* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1991); R. Neville Choonoo, *South Africa's Alternative Press: Voices of Protest and Resistance, 1880-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 252-265. Additionally, there are two literature Master's theses that focus on Nakasa's writing style: Heather Acott, 'Tactics of the Habitat: The Elusive Identity of Nat Nakasa' (Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of South Africa, 2008) and H.B. Singh, 'Nathaniel Nakasa, the Journalist as Autobiographer: A Crisis of Identity' (Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Natal, 1990). By their nature, however, neither pays significant attention to his biography. The most detailed existing academic account of Nakasa's life is found instead in a biographical chapter within Matthew Keaney's Master's thesis, "'I Can Feel My Grin Turn to a Grimace": From Sophiatown Shebeens to the Streets of Soweto', which provides in particular new and rich analysis on the context of Nakasa's suicide.

lends itself particularly well to such goals because of human life's stubborn resistance to fitting neatly into any historical category. People straddle movements, time periods, perspectives and places, throwing the history they were a part of into a new and vibrant light, forcing us to see it from different angles.⁶ By mapping Nakasa's life onto the historical structures that surround it then, this paper aims to expand understanding of both. In doing so, it seeks in part a more complete answer to the question of how he found himself in that New York City window in July 1965, desperate to the point of no return. But human life, like history, cannot be read backwards, and so any study on Nakasa necessarily begins with an acknowledgement of the contingencies that animated both his life and the period of South African history through which it moved.⁷ As he once wrote of his years in Johannesburg, 'people live haphazardly, in snatches of a life they can never afford to lead for long, let alone forever.'⁸

The Gospel of Self Help: Durban, 1937-1957

On 12 May 1937 London erupted in celebration. That morning King George VI and his wife, Queen Elizabeth, were crowned in a lavish ceremony that the *New York Times* declared was 'the most expensive one-day show in the history of modern society.'⁹ From Manchester to Hong Kong, in the metropole and its farthest flung possessions, streets jammed with cheering crowds, celebrating the newest figureheads of the British Empire. That same day, at the outer reach of the Commonwealth, in a township outside Durban, South Africa, Nathaniel Nakasa was born.

That Nakasa's life began at a moment so intensely global was in some senses telling, for his youth was shaped in large part by the tremendous historical moments that intersected it. Born on the cusp of World War II, he was eleven years old in 1948 when South Africa's National Party came to power on the platform of total segregation, or apartheid. Although that event would in the coming decades profoundly alter the country – and by extension Nakasa's life – that transformation was neither sudden nor linear. Instead, the laws and policies enacted by the National Party during its early years in power lurched the program of apartheid forward piecemeal, slowly chipping away at the limited rights and freedoms that Africans had been granted for generations.¹⁰

The experience of Nakasa's own family was indicative of this phenomenon. Both of his parents were mission educated and moved to Durban in the early 1930s to take their place among the small but growing urban African middle class. His mother Alvina worked as a teacher, his father Chamberlain as a typesetter and writer, and by the mid-1940s the young couple had five children.¹¹ For the family itself, that small measure of prosperity was attached to a web of deeply held views about the value of

6 The subject of biography's role in telling South African history has become an object of study and debate in recent years. See for example the exchange between Ciraj Rassool and Jonathan Hyslop in the *South African Review of Sociology*: Ciraj Rassool, 'Rethinking Documentary History and South African Political Biography', *South African Review of Sociology*, 41, 1 (2010), 28-55; Jonathan Hyslop, 'On Biography: A Response to Ciraj Rassool', *South African Review of Sociology*, 41, 2 (2010), 104-115.

7 Special thanks to Karin Shapiro and the students of her 'Modern South African History through Biography and Autobiography' course for first elucidating these themes to me.

8 Nat Nakasa, 'Snatching at the Good Life', *The World of Nat Nakasa* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2005), 37.

9 'Cost of Coronation Heaviest in History', *New York Times*, 13 May 1937, 18.

10 For a more extensive discussion of this theme, see Saul Dubow, 'Introduction: South Africa's 1940s' in Saul Dubow and Alan Jeeves, eds., *South Africa's 1940s: Worlds of Possibilities* (Cape Town: Double Storey, 2005), 1-19 and Deborah Posel, *The Making of Apartheid: 1948-1961, Conflict and Compromise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 23-60.

11 Basic biographical information on Nakasa's early years comes from his younger sister, Gladys Maphumulo. Telephone interview with Gladys Maphumulo, 7 November 2010.

individual upliftment and political moderation as paths to racial equality in South Africa. Steeped in the ideology of self-help and economic autonomy advocated by the black American leader Booker T. Washington and others across the African diaspora in the early twentieth century, those beliefs so influenced Chamberlain that, in 1941, he published a short treatise on the subject entitled *Ivangeli Lokuz' Akha*, or *The Gospel of Self-Help*. Written in Zulu and English, the slim volume described the state of the African race, 'a race at the infant stage of its growth', for an audience of both educated blacks and sympathetic whites.¹² It called upon well-heeled Africans to take responsibility for drawing their race toward Christianity and modernity, while also embracing the aid and guidance of liberal whites.

The tenability of this life philosophy, however, began to disappear as Nakasa came of age, and it was within this shifting of registers that his own perspective on race took shape. In 1953, two years after he began his studies at Zulu Lutheran High School, a mission school in the rural Zululand town of Eshowe, the government passed the Bantu Education Act, codifying apartheid in the realm of education and dictating a series of crippling regulations for black mission schools. Before Bantu education could catch up with Nakasa, he completed his Junior Certificate and left school.¹³ At the end of 1954, at the age of seventeen, he returned to Durban to find work. There he spent a year bouncing from job to job before two childhood friends, the young writers Lewis Nkosi and Theo Zindela, helped him secure a position as a junior reporter at *Ilanga Lase Natal*, the popular Zulu-language weekly founded by John Dube at the turn of the century.¹⁴ Within two years, his reportage had drawn the interest of Sylvester Stein, the editor of the popular Johannesburg monthly *Drum*.

Founded in 1951 by Jim Bailey, the wealthy son of Randlord Sir Abe Bailey, *Drum* was a young player on the black journalistic scene. White-owned but nearly entirely black-written, it came of age with Nakasa's generation and expressed the escalating anger of young Africans living under apartheid. By the time Nakasa came to Stein's attention, the magazine was the most widely circulated publication of its kind on the African continent with 240,000 copies of each issue printed.¹⁵ That broad appeal lay in part in its ability to reach across class lines in the black community, peddling elegant literary journalism alongside gossipy celebrity portraits, sensationalist crime pieces and lovely cover models. Like the world it served as a mouthpiece for, the magazine entangled itself deeply in the quotidian, creating a chaotic and unfocused portrait where the immediate realities of poverty and racial exploitation ruled above nearly all else. Such a style appealed strongly to Nakasa and when Stein offered him a job there in late 1957, he quickly accepted.

'A Clearly Ugly Town': Johannesburg, 1957-1964

By the time Nakasa moved to Johannesburg to work at *Drum*, the magazine's chaotic envisioning of black urban life had launched the careers of a cadre of talented black writers and photographers including Henry Nxumalo, Can Themba, Peter Magubane, Ernest Cole, Todd Matshikiza and William (Bloke) Modisane. Educated at

12 Chamberlain Nakasa, *Ivangeli Lokuz' Akha or The Gospel of Self Help* (Icindezelwe Ngabe Mission Press: Durban, 1941), 78.

13 'Zulu Lutheran High School: Junior Certificate Result - 1954', *Ilanga Lase Natal*, 5 February 1955, 15.

14 Theo Zindela, *Ndazana: The Early Years of Nat Nakasa* (Braamfontein: Skotaville Publishers, 1990), 10-11.

15 'The Press: South African Drumbeats', *Time*, 15 December, 1952. Accessed 12 October 2010. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,820505,00.html>

the moment when segregation cohered into apartheid, these men carried themselves brashly, rejecting their literary predecessors as conservative and woefully romantic, lacking the bite to respond to the dangerous world they inhabited. They saw themselves as an extension neither of an older black South African literary tradition nor of the community of white liberal South African novelists like Alan Paton, but rather in the mould of the Harlem Renaissance. They were, they believed, figures at the crossroads of a literary and social revolution that could redefine the meaning of blackness one photograph, short story or jazz piece at a time.¹⁶

These men wrote – and lived – with a breathlessness born of their youth and their constant struggle to outrun apartheid. But the system was quickly closing in on their intellectual freedom. In 1950 the South African government had passed the Suppression of Communism Act, a bill whose stated purpose was to ban the South African Communist Party and control the dissemination of Marxist doctrine within the country. The law, however, defined communism in part as ‘any doctrine ... which aims at bringing about any political, industrial, social, or economic change within the Union by the promotion of disturbance or disorder’ or ‘encourag[es] feelings of hostility between the European and the non-European races.’¹⁷ This sweeping definition stretched to accommodate nearly any anti-apartheid activity and the Act became a central legislative tool through which the state snuffed out resistant voices throughout the 1950s and 1960s. For writers, who left a paper trail of potentially implicating stories wherever they went, it was particularly dangerous. As Mongane (Wally) Serote described it, the possibility of being banned as a communist forced writers into the awkward task of ‘showing the evils of apartheid without directly condemning it.’¹⁸ Darting around the outskirts of the permissible gave rise to a biting, witty and indirect style of writing in the pages of *Drum*.

Although the Suppression of Communism Act kept Nakasa and the other *Drum* writers from addressing racial politics head on, details of the personal impact of apartheid on black South Africans saturated their journalism. ‘However much we tried to ignore them,’ wrote *Drum*’s first editor Anthony Sampson, ‘in South Africa all roads lead to politics.’¹⁹ Nakasa’s own attempts to address peripherally the country’s politics led him to an even-handed and understated prose style – dispassionate and often subtly ironic. His writings from the early years of his career in Johannesburg reveal a perceptive observer, one with a roving eye who cast his gaze across the breadth of what he called ‘a clearly ugly town’ and took it down in snapshots – a spat between rival gangs of taxi drivers, the brewing of illegal homemade liquors in the townships, the suicide of a popular boxer.²⁰ Wherever you went in black society, his writings suggested, apartheid never lurked far from the edge of the frame.

Simply describing black life under apartheid, however, was at best an indirect challenge to National Party rule and the *Drum* writers’ lack of frontal political engagement was a major point of contention for some members of the activist

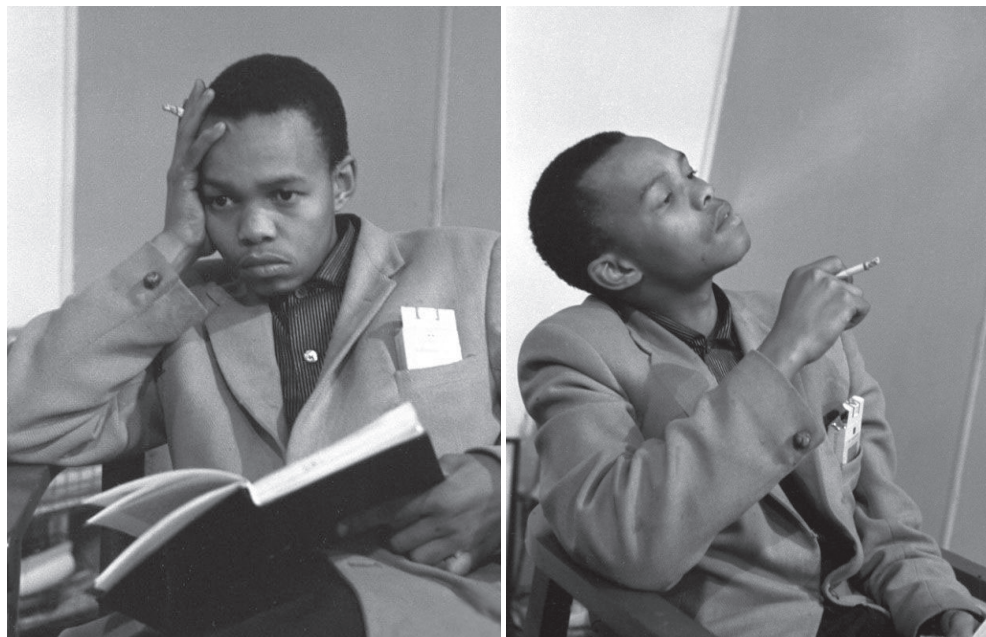
16 Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile* (London: Longmans, 1965), 4-5; Nat Nakasa, ‘Writing in South Africa: A Speech at the University of the Witwatersrand’, *The World of Nat Nakasa* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2005), 230; R. Neville Choonoo, *South Africa’s Alternative Press*, 254.

17 Aluka: The Digital Library of Scholarly Resources from and about Africa, Suppression of Communism Act of 1950. Accessed 16 September, 2010. <http://bit.ly/dzxcOG>.

18 Interview with Mongane Serote in Lauren Groenewald, Dir., *Nat Nakasa: A Native of Nowhere* (DVD, Times Media South Africa, 1999).

19 Anthony Sampson, *Drum: An African Adventure – and Afterwards* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1956), 102.

20 For articles mentioned in this paragraph, see Nat Nakasa, ‘Why Taximen are Terrified’, *Drum*, March 1958, 30-35; ‘Look What We Drink’, *Drum*, February 1958, 15-16; ‘The Life and Death of King Kong’, *Drum*, February 1959, 29-32.



Figures 1 and 2: Nat Nakasa at the offices of *Drum*. Photographs by Jurgen Schadeberg.

community.²¹ Thabo Mbeki, then a young African National Congress member, later conceptualized the gap he saw between the two groups by describing a moment when they collided. One day – probably around 1960 – the teenage Mbeki saw Nakasa walking along a Johannesburg street and offered him a ride home. But when Mbeki asked for directions to his house, the writer, likely drunk, could not tell him which way to go. For him, Nakasa’s disorientation was symptomatic of the larger refusal of intellectuals to engage politically with the apartheid system. ‘Yes there was something of a rebellion, of a refusal to be identified, to be ghettoized,’ he said. ‘But then there’s a small problem – you get a Nat Nakasa who doesn’t even know where he lives.’²² Where he lived, of course, was not only at a township address outside Johannesburg, but also in the world that racial division had created. For Mbeki, Nakasa had conflated his disdain for racial discrimination with true revolution, and thus rendered himself all but useless in the broader fight against apartheid.

The conflicts between black activists and *Drum* writers like Nakasa, however, paled in comparison to the increasing rigidity of government repression against both groups. On 21 March 1960, sixty-nine PAC protesters were killed by police in a peaceful demonstration against the pass laws in the township of Sharpeville, outside of Johannesburg. On 30 March, the government declared a State of Emergency, granting itself wide-ranging powers to quell dissent, and the following week, it banned both the ANC and the PAC, forcing activists to slip underground or out of the country.

21 There was, of course, never a strict dichotomy between journalism and activism. Some *Drum* writers were also ANC or Communist Party members or otherwise involved in resistance activities. Prominent among them were Ezekiel (Es’kia) Mphahlele, Alex La Guma and Dennis Brutus.

22 South African History Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, AL3284: ‘Mark Gevisser’s Research Papers for Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred’, X11, Interview with Thabo Mbeki, 26 August 2000; Mark Gevisser, *A Legacy of Liberation: Thabo Mbeki and the Future of the South African Dream* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 72.

Sharpeville not only changed the tenor of apartheid resistance, it also dragged South Africa into an international spotlight. And increased international attention on South Africa also brought with it a marked interest in the lives of the country's Africans. In 1961 *The New York Times* magazine solicited an essay from Nakasa, which ran on 24 September beneath the headline, 'The Human Meaning of Apartheid'. Flipping between reportage and personal narrative, the piece crafted an image of a country where, 'however distinguished an African may become, there is no hope of escaping his black skin'.²³ The prose, like most of Nakasa's work, was levelheaded and understated, preferring to describe scenes – a man being arrested for not having a pass book, a sign posted outside a government building with a sign declaring 'DOGS AND NATIVES NOT ALLOWED' – rather than directly attacking the apartheid apparatus. Beneath the surface coursed a quiet rage. As he explained to his American readers, the National Party's façade of a neatly divided South Africa – one where white and black could live mutually-exclusive existences – had created a ticking time bomb.

When Nakasa wrote of Africans' escalating fear and sense of powerlessness, his general language veiled just how close to home the issue had become for him. Already nervous about government crackdown, in the State of Emergency after Sharpeville *Drum* faced stark options, either severely limit its political content or be banned completely. Although *Drum* photographers had been the only photojournalists on the scene of the massacre, the emergency regulations blocked them from publishing their account of the shooting for more than six months.²⁴ And in the July 1960 issue of the magazine, Nakasa reported on a cadre of ANC activists involved with the anti-pass campaigns who had gone into exile in Basutoland. In the fifteen-hundred words of the piece, he never mentioned the word Sharpeville.²⁵ Forced into a kind of journalistic amnesia, Nakasa and *Drum* struggled to convey the magnitude of apartheid resistance in a country whose government was intent on pretending it did not exist.

This chokehold around the country's news intensified a problem already building in the *Drum* offices – retaining writers in a country that refused to let them write. Over the previous three years, the sardonic former *Drum* editor Sylvester Stein, as well as Nakasa's fellow writers and friends Todd Matshikiza, Arthur Maimane and Bloke Modisane had slipped into exile in Europe. And one of his closest friends, Lewis Nkosi, had gone to the United States to participate in a journalism fellowship at Harvard. Denied a passport, Nkosi had accepted what was known as an 'exit permit', a document that gave him the legal right to leave South Africa as long as he signed away his citizenship and agreed never to return.²⁶ With the government and police hovering low over the activities of dissidents, the antics of a black writer's life in Johannesburg began to feel for many like they simply were not worth the tremendous danger they posed.

The initial wave of black writers going into exile, however, left a vacuum of leadership that Nakasa quickly exploited. In early 1963, at the age of twenty-five, he

23 Nat Nakasa, 'The Human Meaning of Apartheid', *The New York Times Magazine*, 24 September, 1961, 46.

24 The only Sharpeville-related content to appear during the State of Emergency was a photographic essay taken at the funeral of the victims. Photographs and accounts taken by *Drum* writers at the scene of the massacre, however, were published in many international outlets and helped build up global outrage against the National Party. Peter Magubane, 'Sharpeville Funeral', *Drum*, May 1960, 28-31; Tom Hopkinson, *In the Fiery Continent* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1962), 258.

25 Nat Nakasa, 'Over the Border', *Drum*, July 1960, 24-27.

26 National Archives (Pretoria), NTS 2769: 1623/301 Paspoort Lewis Nkosi; Karin Shapiro, 'No Exit? : The Politics of Emigration Restrictions in Early Apartheid South Africa' (Unpublished paper, North-eastern Workshop for Southern Africa Conference, April 2007), 9.

announced to his shrinking circle of colleagues that he intended to found a literary magazine to showcase African writing. By that time Nakasa had been in Johannesburg for more than five years, enough time to recognize that black literary production in the city had few outlets. The labour-intensive process of bringing a book to life, from editing to printing to advertising and distribution, required the financial backing of a white publishing house. But liberal English-language presses were practically nonexistent in South Africa. This meant that for a black writer to be able to publish a novel or similar work in the 1960s, he or she had to have strong international connections and know how to appeal to a largely European audience. In these conditions, few black South African writers managed to get book projects off the ground.²⁷

With publishing houses largely out of reach, magazines remained the sole option open to most black creative writers. Aside from sporadically published literary journals and a handful of left-wing political magazines that accepted fiction, there were few places that even published short stories and poetry.²⁸ As Nakasa intended it, his magazine – named *The Classic* after a popular downtown shebeen – would step in and help fill this niche. It was to be published quarterly as a collection of stories and poems written by Africans, a term he took broadly to mean anyone from the African continent, regardless of race or exile status.²⁹

Before the magazine expanded into anything more than an idea, it hit its first snag: finances. Without seed money of his own, Nakasa turned to the United States. About two years earlier, Nakasa and Nkosi had met an American academic named John (Jack) Thompson, an English professor and the chair of a philanthropic organization called the Farfield Foundation that bankrolled artistic and cultural projects around the world. Travelling through Africa, Thompson had been impressed by the vitality of the writing scene in South Africa and by Nakasa and Nkosi in particular.³⁰ After he left the country, the three men stayed in contact and in May 1962, Farfield pledged \$1600 to the initial one-year run of *The Classic*, setting in motion Nakasa's literary ambitions.³¹

Beneath the surface of Thompson's enthusiastic support for Nakasa, however, was a powerful secret. The Farfield Foundation, which Nakasa knew only by Thompson and the group's minimalist stationery, described its mission as to 'preserv[e] the cultural heritage of the free world' by funding literary, artistic and scientific enterprises that strengthened 'the cultural ties that bind nations.'³² What the organization did not say, and indeed what few outside its board of directors knew, was that Farfield Foundation received its funding directly from the United States Central Intelligence Agency.

Although Thompson never told Nakasa, Farfield was part of a constellation of philanthropic 'organizations' – in reality little more than letterheads and bank

27 Walter Ehmeir, 'Publishing South African Literature in English in the 1960s', *Research in African Literatures*, 26, 1 (Spring 1995), 111-113.

28 *Drum* had once published fiction as well, but stopped for the most part in 1958, when the editorship turned over from Sylvester Stein, a lover of short fiction, to the hardnosed Tom Hopkinson, who came from a news background and believed the magazine should focus strictly on journalistic forms of writing. Jim Bailey agreed, arguing that crime, sports and gossip sold the magazine – not literary copy. For further detail, see Ehmeir, 'Publishing South African Literature in English in the 1960s', 115; Michael Chapman, *The Drum Decade: Stories from the 1950s* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1989), 216.

29 Nat Nakasa, 'Comment', 4.

30 Peter Benson, "'Border Operators": Black Orpheus and the Genesis of Modern African Art and Literature', *Research in African Literatures*, 14, 4 (1983), 442.

31 University of the Witwatersrand Historical Papers Collection, Nathaniel Nakasa Papers 1963-1984, B3, John Thompson to Nat Nakasa, 15 May 1962.

32 Farfield Foundation informational brochure quoted in Frances Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 1999), 126.

accounts – that the C.I.A. developed in the 1950s and 1960s to cultivate a pro-American intellectual elite throughout the capitalist and non-aligned world. As the Agency's now infamous covert political operations against communism drew the world's gaze, the C.I.A. also funneled millions of dollars into the development of cultural and intellectual institutions – magazines, journals, concerts, movies, conferences, music festivals – that it believed could lock horns with the writers, artists and theorists emerging from the Eastern bloc. Like much of the C.I.A.'s work during the Cold War, its cultural programs had nebulous and diffuse purposes, providing money for everything from Jackson Pollack paintings to Lebanese literary magazines to a Parisian run of Stravinsky's 'Rite of Spring'.³³ The recipients were united only by the perceived ability of their funding to conjure up good will for American interests and to promote a vaguely defined non-communist worldview.³⁴

In Africa, these cultural overtures against communism held special significance. As countries across the continent came unmoored from their former colonial powers by the dozen in the early 1960s, the United States faced the sobering reality that any of these new nations could become new communist nations – allying not only their politics but also their military, markets and labour with the Soviet Union. With the ideology of communism so deeply rooted in revolution, U.S. foreign policy experts feared that if it became mixed with the nationalism sweeping Africa, a wide communist takeover on the continent was a real possibility. Building a moderate African intellectual elite interested in stability and reform as opposed to open rebellion was thus seen as a crucial move to prevent this fate.

Guided by this belief, Thompson and Farfield sought to create a community of literary intellectuals across Africa. Surveying the political landscape of the continent, Thompson later said he had been struck in several cases by the importance of 'literary people' in the transition from colony to nation.³⁵ Given this overarching mission, Nakasa's own particular politics were of little importance to Thompson. The funding for *The Classic* came with 'no strings attached whatsoever'.³⁶ Nakasa was simply seen as an anchor, holding black cultural expression steady as the politics of liberation churned around it.³⁷

Backed by Farfield, the first issue of *The Classic* arrived in print in June 1963 on an initial run of 1500 copies, featuring stories and poems from several rising South African literary stars, including Can Themba, Ezekiel (Es'kia) Mphahlele, and Casey Motsisi.³⁸ Although *The Classic* was not the only journal of English-language creative writing in South Africa at the time of its publication, according to literature scholar Walter Ehmeir, it quickly developed a unique identity within the country's literary

33 *Ibid.*, 117; 'Arab Magazine Banned by Cairo', *New York Times*, 24 July, 1966, 3.

34 Nakasa was not the only *Drum* writer to be caught up in C.I.A.-funded activities. While living abroad in Paris, Es'kia Mphahlele worked with the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an artistic philanthropic organization later revealed to be bankrolled by the C.I.A. British journalist Cecil Eprile, one-time editor-in-chief of both *Drum* and its sister paper the *Golden City Post*, who went on in the mid-1960s to head the London-based news service, 'Forum World Features', a C.I.A.-funded venture designed to provide sympathetic news coverage of American exploits abroad, particularly in Vietnam. Research into the C.I.A.'s cultural projects remains difficult due to the agency's refusal to declassify many materials related to the subject, including those concerning Nat Nakasa. See Roy Paterson, *Residual Uncertainty: Trying to Avoid Intelligence and Policy Mistakes in the Modern World* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2003), 71; Ruth Obee, *Es'Kia Mphahlele: Themes of Alienation and African Humanism* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999), 14.

35 Quoted in Peter Benson, "Border Operators", 442.

36 *Ibid.*, 442.

37 The C.I.A. has denied the author's request to declassify its materials relating to Nakasa on the grounds that they constitute a matter of national security and that their disclosure would imperil sensitive intelligence sources and methods. An appeal is pending.

38 Nathaniel Nakasa Papers, B1, Nat Nakasa to Lewis Nkosi, 29 May 1963.

landscape for its receptiveness to black prose.³⁹ Indeed, while what he characterizes as the other major South African literary magazine of the era, *Contrast*, published only three black writers in the decade of the 1960s, Nakasa's magazine had a nearly evenly split of black and white writers.⁴⁰ Perhaps because of this enthusiasm for African writing, *The Classic* also openly recognized the intrinsic entanglement of the literary and the political. As Nakasa wrote in his first editor's note,

If the daily lives [of our contributors] are not regulated by political decisions, that will be reflected in *The Classic*. If, however, the work they do, if their sexual lives and their search for God are governed by political decrees, then that will also be reflected in the material published by *The Classic*. After all, these stories and poems and drawings and sculpture will be about the lives of these people.⁴¹

So evident, in fact, were the political undertones in the first issue of *The Classic* that Thompson chastised Nakasa for neglecting writing quality in favour of challenging the government.⁴²

Nakasa was in fact deeply concerned with both, forcing into publication his own vision of the South African specificities that defined his life. Although the magazine would go on in its later issues to feature writing by international notables, including Doris Lessing and Leopold Senghor, South African writing always remained especially important to Nakasa and the other editors. As writer Barney Simon, who later took the reins as editor-in-chief, explained, the magazine was meant to be a reservoir of 'the textures ... the aliveness, the sense of corrugated iron, concrete, flesh, sweat and heat that is Johannesburg'.⁴³ In this sense *The Classic*, like Nakasa's other writing endeavors, was an exercise in literary self-preservation. As the cultural and social landscape of South Africa shifted under the whims of state-enforced segregation, he found a way to stop the clock, freezing his version of the city in time through art and writing and exporting this vision to an international audience.

Just as *The Classic* kicked into gear, however, Nakasa began to express deep frustration with life in South Africa, repeatedly complaining to friends and colleagues that he 'felt like hopping the next plane to go seek my fortune outside this hole'.⁴⁴ Nakasa's disillusionment was fed in part by the growing danger of publishing literature in South Africa. In 1963, the same year as the first issue of *The Classic* was published, Parliament had passed the Publications and Entertainment Act, a piece of legislation that granted the state broad powers to ban or censor content it deemed unfavourable. This time around, the list included anything that was 'harmful to public morals', blasphemous, ridiculed 'any section of the inhabitants of the Republic', or posed a danger to the general peace. In the fall of 1963, for instance, Nakasa found himself forced to reject a short story submitted to *The Classic* since it was 'too hot to handle

39 *Contrast* was also funded by the Farfield Foundation, as were several other literary magazines in Africa, including *Transition*, *Black Orpheus* and *Encounter*.

40 Ehmeir, 'Publishing South African Literature in English in the 1960s', 119-120.

41 Nakasa, 'Comment', 4.

42 'Your poems seem to me often to be more concerned with making a statement than with making a poem', he wrote. Nathaniel Nakasa Papers, B3, John Thompson to Nat Nakasa. 13 August 1963.

43 Barney Simon, 'My Years with *The Classic*: A Note', *English in Africa*, 7, 2 (Sept. 1980), 79.

44 Nathaniel Nakasa Papers, B1, Nat Nakasa to Arthur Maimane, 28 June 1963.

because [of] a rather bold bedroom angle, which he realized could catch the eye of the government censors and could spell death to the entire magazine.⁴⁵

As censorship slowly advanced, it collided with a vicious new wave of political repression, culminating in the arrest and trial of several top ANC leaders in 1963 and 1964. As Nakasa watched these developments, he became increasingly anxious about his personal and professional prospects in South Africa. In early 1964, he submitted an application to the Nieman Fellowship, the same Harvard journalism program that had taken Nkosi to the United States a few years earlier.

Even as he turned his sights beyond South Africa's borders, however, his career in Johannesburg had taken an unexpected turn. Around the time he applied for the Nieman, he received a call from Allister Sparks, then the editorial page editor of the liberal white Johannesburg newspaper, *The Rand Daily Mail*, one of the few anti-apartheid broadsheets still in publication. Sparks told Nakasa that the *Daily Mail* felt it was time they employed a black columnist, one who could convey the African experience to their readership. Nakasa's writing struck him as 'easy and articulate', a rare voice that could reach across racial lines and avoid alienating white readers with radical politics.⁴⁶ In fact, Nakasa's ability to play to white audiences had not gone unnoticed by the *Drum* community, many of whom noted it with less good cheer than Sparks. 'Nat tommed', wrote Wally Serote. 'He tommed while we were rat-racing for survival.'⁴⁷ Masekela, who was acquainted with Nakasa in Johannesburg, put it more gently. 'He was the darling of the white activist community,' he said.⁴⁸

Nakasa, however, seized on that status. In March, his columns began to appear bi-weekly in the *Daily Mail* beneath a small photograph and the pithy tagline, 'As I See It'. Slotted amidst a sea of white faces on the editorial pages, the largely narrative column offered a sense of immediacy about the impacts of apartheid that appeared nowhere else in the paper.

Then, in April 1964, Harvard called. Nakasa had been invited to join the 1965 class of Nieman Fellows. Like Nkosi, the writer was soon engaged in a protracted battle with the state for permission to travel. In the three years since Nkosi accepted an exit permit and travelled to the United States as a stateless man, the South African government had become increasingly savvy as to how it could use the issue of emigration to its own political gain. Dissident elites, it realized, could be frustrated into submission by the seemingly arbitrary refusal of travel documents, or as with Nkosi, by being allowed to leave only on the condition of permanently forfeiting their citizenship. Between 1962 and 1964, the state refused some 647 passport applications, without ever developing a coherent policy on who could or could not leave, and why. Passport control rested entirely at the opaque level of bureaucracy, where it was nearly impossible to trace or unravel.⁴⁹

Frequently existing on the cusp of political activism, artists and intellectuals faced a particularly high level of uncertainty. In the years preceding Nakasa's passport application, he had watched as *Drum* writers Ezekiel (Es'kia) Mphahlele and Todd Matshikiza were granted passports, while William (Bloke) Modisane and Lewis Nkosi

45 Nathaniel Nakasa Papers, B1, Nat Nakasa to Ezekiel (Es'kia) Mphahlele, 18 November 1963.

46 Interview with Allister Sparks, Johannesburg, 21 October 2011; Heather Acott, 'Tactics of the Habitat', 9.

47 Mongane Serote, 'The Nakasa World', *The World of Nat Nakasa* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2005), xxx.

48 Interview with Hugh Masekela, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 12 October 2010.

49 Information in this paragraph comes from Karin Shapiro, 'No Exit? : The Politics of Emigration Restrictions in Early Apartheid South Africa', 4, 20. This paper is part of Shapiro's larger study on South African emigration law and policy between 1948 and 1994, which she has generously allowed me to draw upon for this article.

were denied them. Musicians Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela, to whom Nakasa would be close in the United States, had managed to secure passports, but Hugh's sister Barbara was forced to leave on an exit permit. And just after Nakasa submitted his application, his then-girlfriend, a high school teacher named Sheila Cingo, received a passport to study teaching at Ball State College in Indiana.⁵⁰ Nakasa himself would not be so fortunate. By September, the month the Nieman fellowship officially began in Cambridge, he received word that his application had been denied. 'It is a matter of grave concern,' wrote the Bantu Affairs Commissioner of the Witwatersrand in an internal memo concerning his application, 'that his [writing] should stimulate disaffection and unrest among the Bantu population.'⁵¹ Although Nakasa himself was never privy to that correspondence, the reality was clear: if he wanted to go, he would have to leave on an exit permit, without the option of return.

He was, in fact, on the cusp of arrest if he remained in South Africa. An extensive file on the writer kept by the Department of Justice shows that law enforcement had been tailing him since May of 1959, when he was first observed 'attending a coloured party at Heidelberg apartment 19, Pretoria.'⁵² Over the next five years, police records indicate that Nakasa was followed on at least twenty-six separate occasions, to ANC meetings and mixed-race parties, to secret gatherings with 'likely communists' and to *Drum* interviews with 'well known left-leaning person[s]'. The police further intercepted pieces of his correspondence and kept a file of his writing, quoting both extensively in defense of their assertion that Nakasa constituted a major danger to the state. 'The promotion of animosity between whites and non-whites is one of ... the marks of communism in South Africa,' the file noted. 'Through his communication and declarations [Nat Nakasa] advances [these] aims.' Thus, under the illustrious Suppression of Communism Act, the Justice Secretary ordered that Nakasa be banned for a period of five years concluding in September 1969.⁵³

The fact that Nakasa had not, in fact, demonstrated any particular interest in the ideology of communism was of little importance for the government. In the unique shorthand of the apartheid state, 'communist' stood for dissident, activist, intellectual and protester, offering an internationally comprehensible way for the South African government to mark its enemies. The United States spoke this language as well although, if Nakasa is any indication, some nuances occasionally got lost in translation. Despite the fact that the two countries professed a shared desire to defeat communism wherever it lurked, including within the anti-apartheid movement, his experience suggests that they never entirely agreed on a definition of exactly what they were fighting against. As the South African justice system moved to stamp Nakasa as a communist for writing and living a critique of apartheid, the C.I.A. propped up those very same activities in order to cultivate the young writer's potential to steer his politically-charged country clear of communist influence. Both countries deliberately used the globalized term to lend international political weight to how they

50 Thanks to Karin Shapiro for alerting me to the existence of these records. National Archives (Pretoria), BAO 3610: C100/6/2460, Paspoort Todd and Esme Matshikiza; BAO 3610: C100/6/2461 Paspoort Miriam Makeba; BAO 3471: C100/6/658 Paspoort Barbara Masekela; NTS 2752: 1155/301 Paspoort William Modisane; BAO 3563: C100/6/1813 Paspoort Sheila Cingo; NTS 2769: 1623/301 Paspoort Lewis Nkosi; Marion Scher, 'What I've Learnt: Hugh Masekela,' *Times Live*, 30 October 2011. Accessed 20 November 2011. <http://www.timeslive.co.za/lifestyle/2011/10/30/what-i-ve-learnt-hugh-masekela>

51 National Archives (Pretoria), BAO 3561: C100/6/1789, Paspoort Nathaniel Nakasa, 11.

52 Thanks to Heather Acott for first sending me a copy of this police file. South African History Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, AL2878, Freedom of Information Programme, B01.3.5.5, Department of Justice file for Nathaniel Nakasa, 1958-1965, 17. Translated by Kate Ryan.

53 *Ibid.*, 4

approached Nat Nakasa, but for each the word ‘communist’ obscured a particular and localized meaning and purpose.

In Nakasa’s case, however, the South African government never got the chance to officially stamp him as a communist. He had already decided to accept the exit permit, foregoing any possibility that he might return to South Africa. Although he didn’t know it, he made that choice just in time. Tucked into the pages of his police surveillance file is an unsigned copy of his banning order, awaiting the final approval of the Minister of Justice B.J. Vorster.⁵⁴

‘A Puppet Dangling from a String’: Cambridge and New York, 1964-1965

Sometime after Nat Nakasa arrived at Harvard in October 1964, a photographer snapped an official portrait of his class of Nieman Fellows. Nakasa stands in the front row, his tweed jacket buttoned over a thin striped tie. The only black man in the group, he is also the youngest. Surrounded by balding heads and Buddy Holly glasses, he holds his hands behind his back and flashes a thin-lipped smile. The stiff, professional image is a kind of photographic mirror for Nakasa’s own vision of Harvard as an insular place ‘steeped in the sombre business of education.’⁵⁵ Only months before the photo was taken, he had been crafting slyly mocking critiques of apartheid for *The Rand Daily Mail* and sneaking across Johannesburg to attend multiracial parties. Now, the bustle and sharp edges of that world had given way to a more metred life of college seminars and invitations to speak about the African experience of apartheid for audiences of curious Americans.⁵⁶ And in a country in the midst of its own complex racial upheaval, where the president had a civil rights agenda but police regularly jailed African-American activists for peaceful protests, Nakasa found himself unable to fully grasp the political or racial landscape.⁵⁷

At Harvard in particular he found an American institution that seemed caught between two visions of itself. As student protests erupted at universities across the country in the mid-1960s to challenge American foreign policy, domestic inequality, and the intellectual rigidity of universities, Harvard men still followed the centuries-old tradition of taking their meals in the school’s dining halls wearing a coat and tie. Fewer than 100 undergraduates were black and even the simple creation of a black student group had been hotly contested and did not come to fruition until the spring of 1963.⁵⁸ By the time Nakasa arrived on campus in late 1964, however, student

54 Ibid., 9

55 Nat Nakasa, ‘Met With Smiles and Questions,’ *The Rand Daily Mail*, 28 November 1964, 11.

56 See for instance ‘South Africa,’ *The Harvard Crimson*, 16 March 1965. Accessed 10 February 2011. <http://theharvardcrimson.com/article/1965/3/16/south-africa-pthe-sds-will-sponsor/>

57 Nakasa’s ten months in the United States are in many ways the most challenging part of his life to reconstruct because he published only two pieces of writing – a final column for *The Rand Daily Mail* and an essay for *The New York Times* – and appears to have made no close friends. Those who knew him then tend to speak vaguely of a ‘shy and reticent’ man with whom they occasionally ate lunch, talked, or attended class. When asked in 2010 about Nakasa’s mental state near the end of his life, friend and fellow South African exile Hugh Masekela shook his head and said only, ‘I didn’t have that kind of relationship with him.’ In fact, it seems no one did – the most systematic and detailed record of his time in the United States is the surveillance file kept by the FBI to monitor his immigration status. However, these holes in the historical record are themselves telling. They reveal a life lived in soft focus, held at a distance from the people and experiences around it. In doing so, the gaps speak indirectly to how exile could have undone a talented writer like Nat Nakasa at what should have been the apex of his career. Telephone interview with Ray Jenkins, 28 February 2011; Gail Gerhart, email message to author 15 March 2011; Jennifer Leaning, email message to author, 31 March 2011; Tim Creery, email message to author, 19 June 2010; Parker Donham, email message to author, 10 March 2011; interview with Hugh Masekela, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 12 October 12 2010. Gerhart, Leaning, Creery, and Donham were all Harvard/Radcliffe students distantly acquainted with Nakasa during his time in Cambridge, Jenkins was a fellow Nieman scholar.

58 Harold McDougall, ‘Negro Students’ Challenge to Liberalism,’ *The Harvard Crimson*, 31 May 1967. Accessed 9 April, 2011. <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1967/5/31/negro-students-challenge-to-liberalism-pthe/>



Figure 2: The 1965 class of Nieman Fellows included fifteen prominent journalists, including reporters from the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *L.A. Times*, as well as newspaper editors, radio producers, and television journalists from India, Iran, Japan, New Zealand, Canada, and South Korea. Nat Nakasa is second from right in the first row

activism was rising in profile, bolstered by the creation of a branch of the national protest group Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the return to campus of several students who had participated in the Mississippi Freedom Summer. Nakasa himself would eventually tap into this protest culture, but it was initially the institution's apparent conservatism that caught his attention.

Early in his first term at Harvard, Nakasa befriended a black student named Harold McDougall, who quickly became the young writer's sounding board for his observations about Harvard life. Nakasa told his friend that his first few weeks in Cambridge had led him to see Harvard as rigidly and obtusely academic in its approach to questions of social change.⁵⁹ The approach of black Harvard students and professors in particular perplexed him. 'I could probably spend a year here without ever knowing the full meaning of being black in the United States,' he wrote soon after his arrival in Cambridge.⁶⁰ McDougall remembered that Nakasa frequently tried to greet black students he didn't know on campus. But while he saw this as a gesture

59 I wish to thank Alan Venable for first sharing this source with me. Harold McDougall, "To Nat", *Harvard Yearbook* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1966), 130.

60 Nat Nakasa, 'Met With Smiles and Questions', 11.

of solidarity, they were mortified that he would single them out for friendliness based on nothing more than the colour of their skin.⁶¹ Blackness may have hopped oceans and cut across borders, but how it was experienced, Nakasa was learning, depended very much on where you stood.

Despite his reservations about Harvard, the young writer initially embraced the Nieman program. Loosely structured, the Fellowship offered approximately fifteen mid-career journalists from around the world a year of broad access to the elite university's resources and each other. Each Tuesday, the contingent of writers gathered at the Nieman office for a seminar with a Harvard professor, and each Thursday the program held a weekly Nieman dinner.⁶² Aside from those two engagements, the Fellows were free to do what they wished to engage in the intellectual life of the university – take classes, give talks and pursue independent reporting projects. Suddenly unencumbered by the narrow confines of the apartheid state, Nakasa embraced his newfound intellectual mobility. He enrolled in several undergraduate courses, including Social Structure of Modern Africa and Negro History, and late in the term took on a second assignment from the *New York Times* magazine, a personal essay about his impressions of Harlem.⁶³

In Cambridge, however, he found himself continuously reminded of the distance he had placed between himself and his home. Beginning at the end of 1964 and continuing throughout the rest of Nakasa's time in the United States, student and community groups around Cambridge inundated him with requests to speak on the subject of the 'South African situation'.⁶⁴ These gatherings demoralized him, he confessed to a friend, because they made him feel like a 'puppet dangling from a string', an act on display for the benefit of white liberals looking to assuage their own guilt. Had they noticed, he wondered, that there was a massive civil rights struggle underway in their own country?⁶⁵

Compounding Nakasa's isolation was his tenuous legal situation. Stripped of his South African citizenship, he had entered the United States on a non-renewable one-year exchange visa. On 22 January 1965, he visited the Immigration and Naturalization Services office in Boston to ask for an extension of that visa, as well as permission to travel to and from England, where a large community of South African exiles resided. According to official records, the office quickly rejected his requests, but his detailed questions about the length and flexibility of his visa also threw up a red flag for the immigration official he spoke to that day. Two weeks later, she contacted the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Boston to recommend they open a file on the South African writer.⁶⁶

Just as Nakasa became a person of interest to the FBI, he began to draw the renewed ire of the South African government. In March 1965 he spoke at a series of protests organized by Harvard's SDS chapter around the issue of divestment from

61 Harold McDougall, 'To Nat', 130.

62 Telephone interview with Ray Jenkins, 28 February 2011.

63 Seeming to speak obliquely of his own experience, Nakasa wrote in the *Times* that the people he met in Harlem were 'like South African refugees who are desperate for a change back home but remain irrevocably in love with the country'. Nat Nakasa, 'Mr. Nakasa Goes to Harlem', *New York Times Magazine*, 7 February 1965, 48.

64 'Africa Symposium', *The Harvard Crimson*, 16 April 1965. Accessed 30 April 2010. <http://theharvardcrimson.com/article/1965/4/16/africa-symposium-pnathaniel-nakasa-south-african/>

65 Kathleen Conwell, 'Letter to Nat Nakasa', *The World of Nat Nakasa* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2005), xxxiii.

66 Immigration and FBI files on Nat Nakasa were declassified at the request of the author through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request. United States Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, File A13-968-005: Nathaniel Nakasa, In possession of author; Federal Bureau of Investigation File on Nathaniel Nakasa, 1964-65. Special Agent in Charge (SAC), Boston to Director, FBI, 28 April 1965. In possession of author.

apartheid South Africa. Building on the momentum of those talks, Nakasa travelled the same week to Washington D.C. to present at a conference on the 'South African Crisis and American Action', where he had been invited to address the subject of 'policies and activities of groups within South Africa'.⁶⁷ That rather bland headline belied an apparently incendiary talk, at least in the eyes of the South African authorities. The following week, the South African Ambassador in Washington cabled his country's police commissioner to report that 'Nathaniel Nakasa, a bantu from South Africa ... spoke in an exaggerated and emotional fashion' at the conference. Soon after, the FBI special agent surveying Nakasa from the American end also recorded that the writer had recently participated in demonstrations against the apartheid state.⁶⁸

But whereas once the momentum of giving speeches powerful enough to inflame two governments might have delighted Nakasa, his talks in Cambridge and D.C. seem to have only left him embittered. The following week he brusquely explained to a reporter for the Harvard student newspaper, *The Harvard Crimson*, that appealing to the immorality of apartheid could not destroy it. 'What happens in South Africa will be determined by power, not by who's right or wrong,' he said.⁶⁹ And the problem lay not only with policies of white supremacy, he continued. South Africans themselves were 'too concerned about having a good time and getting along' to challenge the state effectively.⁷⁰ Far from home, he seemed to be taking an indirect swipe at his own former life in Johannesburg. But he could do little more in the United States. Majority rule in South Africa, he admitted glumly, would 'come all right – someday. But not for a long, long time.'⁷¹

Shortly after the Washington conference, Nakasa left Cambridge once again on a reporting trip for the *The New York Times* magazine, this time to Alabama. But seeing the American civil rights movement was enough to shake him deeply. When he returned to Cambridge, a friend recalled that it was as though 'something had broken inside him'.⁷² Weeks later, his editors returned the first draft of the article he had written about his experience with a request for a rewrite. In the aftermath of the experience, Masekela remembers that the young writer's ego deflated. 'He felt that he had lost it or just never had it,' he remembered.⁷³ That spring, Nakasa also fumbled on an essay for *Esquire* about American women. With his track record blemished, no new assignments were forthcoming.⁷⁴

When the Nieman program ended in June 1965, Nakasa left Cambridge and moved south to a neighbourhood he had once characterized as 'the most indescribable place I have ever seen', Harlem.⁷⁵ But with his visa set to expire at the end of August, he couldn't settle into life in the city. That summer, friends remembered, Nakasa became increasingly reclusive, prone to solitary drinking. They watched helplessly as he backslid into a shadowy depression. 'He told all of us how unhappy he was,'

67 Program. National Conference on South African Crisis and American Action, 21-23 March 1965. Accessed April 10 2011. Aluka. <http://bit.ly/i24ILW>

68 Federal Bureau of Investigation File on Nathaniel Nakasa, 1964-65. Special Agent in Charge (SAC), Boston to Director, FBI, April 28 1965..

69 John Gerhart, 'Silhouette: Nathaniel Nakasa', *The Harvard Crimson*, 31 March 1965. <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1965/3/31/nathaniel-nakasa-p-the-first-time-i/?print=1>

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 Kathleen Conwell, 'Letter to Nat Nakasa', *The World of Nat Nakasa*, xxxiv.

73 Interview with Hugh Masekela, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 12 October 2010.

74 My gratitude to Alan Venable for locating this article for me. Ray Jenkins, 'Memories of Nat Nakasa' (Unpublished manuscript: 1965). In possession of author.

75 Nat Nakasa, 'Mr. Nakasa Goes to Harlem', 40.

Masekela said, 'but we couldn't hold him.'⁷⁶ Nadine Gordimer, who visited Nakasa in New York, remembered that it was a shock to see her friend so leveled by his own sadness. 'He was never a depressed person while he was in South Africa,' she said. But in Manhattan, he confessed to her that his mother had been institutionalized for mental illness when he was young and he feared going the same way she had.⁷⁷

Then, one evening in July, Masekela remembers that he and his wife Miriam Makeba invited Nakasa to go with them to see a play on Broadway. They waited outside the theatre but when he didn't show up, they headed inside without him.⁷⁸ Later that same night, John Thompson was home in his Central Park West apartment when he received a call from a mutual friend of himself and Nakasa. The South African writer was in Harlem, 'very disturbed and talking about suicide.'⁷⁹ Thompson immediately went out to collect his young friend. Back at his apartment, he poured them each a drink and the two men began to talk. Nakasa told him he was terrified that he was 'doomed to be mentally ill' because of his mother. And more practically, he confessed he was in dire financial straits, jobless and nearly out of money. But after an hour or two of conversation, Thompson remembered that Nakasa seemed calmer, more relaxed and he offered to let him stay the night in his guest bedroom. Then, exhausted by the evening's ordeal, Thompson went off to bed himself.

The following morning, a commotion from outside jarred him awake. When he opened his front door, a police officer was standing in the entrance. Nakasa's body was lying on the sidewalk, seven stories down.⁸⁰

Conclusion

On 30 June 2009, Jacob Zuma stood before a room of dignitaries at Durban's Elangeni Hotel to deliver the keynote address for the annual Nat Nakasa Award for Media Integrity. Given by the South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF) each year since 1998, the prize honours a journalist whose work shows a commitment to telling important and dangerous stories, no matter the political trends of the day.⁸¹ Facing the crowd of writers, editors and political dignitaries in the audience that night, Zuma lauded the country's journalists as a 'vital partner' in protecting and strengthening South Africa's young democracy. And staring into the past, he conjured up the name of the man who had inspired the award he was presenting. 'This evening,' he told the audience, 'you are celebrating the struggle of Nat Nakasa, and many other courageous journalists like him, against a political system that sought to silence them.'⁸²

A year later, the president found himself squaring off against the very journalists he had praised that evening in Durban. In July 2010, following a series of embarrassing press revelations about corrupt deals orchestrated by the ANC, the president announced plans to create a government-run media tribunal to punish journalists

76 Interview with Hugh Masekela, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 12 October 2010.

77 It is worth noting that the impressions of both Gordimer and Masekela on Nakasa's final months were recorded after his death, allowing them hindsight on the tragedy that may have influenced their recollections of this period. Telephone interview with Nadine Gordimer, 4 November 2010.

78 Interview with Hugh Masekela, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 12 October 2010.

79 John Thompson Interview in Lauren Groenewald, Dir., *Nat Nakasa: A Native of Nowhere* (DVD, Times Media South Africa, 1999).

80 Ibid; Matthew Keaney, "'I Can Feel My Grin Turn to a Grimace'", 128.

81 For further detail about the Nakasa Award, as well as a list of winners, see 'Awards', South African National Editors' Forum. Accessed 3 April 2011. <http://www.sanef.org.za/awards>

82 Jacob Zuma, 'Address at the SANEF Awards Dinner', South African Government Information, 30 June 2009. Accessed 1 April 2011. <http://www.info.gov.za/speech/DynamicAction?pageid=461&sid=780&tid=799>

who published material considered to be slander or libel. That same winter, the government began aggressively pushing a law that would classify broad swaths of governmental information ‘in the national interest’ as being out of reach of the press.⁸³ And as the press and the government locked horns over freedom of speech and expression, both sides called upon the legacy of Nat Nakasa to support their cause. Minister of Justice Jeff Radebe told the members of SANEF that the new press regulations would protect the country’s citizens – journalists included – from the dangers of misinformation, helping to create a media landscape that was a ‘fitting tribute to departed gallant fighters such as Nat Nakasa.’⁸⁴ But Radebe’s Nat Nakasa also had to contend with the Nat Nakasa conjured up by critics of the government’s policy. As Oxford professor Peter McDonald, a scholar of South African censorship, saw it, ‘the ghost of Nat Nakasa’ would haunt Parliament as it debated the new laws, ‘because, as [he] insisted, the freedom of expression ... is an inalienable part of human dignity and a cornerstone of democracy.’⁸⁵ It seemed that wherever one stood in the debate, Nat Nakasa was a symbol of the scars apartheid had left on South African journalism and a challenge for the country to avoid the mistakes of its past.

The fact that individuals can use Nakasa’s legacy in such wildly divergent ways, however, speaks to a deeply troubling fact. Over the last four decades, popular memory has sapped his life story – like those of so many others associated with anti-apartheid causes – of nearly any substantive content, distilling it into little more than the fable of a man destroyed by the crushing weight of injustice. As Pippa Green, a 1999 Nieman Fellow from South Africa noted, by dying so young and so far from home, ‘Nat Nakasa has become the symbol of the loneliness of exile and of the struggle for dignity in racially oppressive societies.’⁸⁶ And it is not hard to see why. His biting anti-apartheid journalism, his meteoric rise to prominence and, most of all, his brisk and tragic end, form the kind of narrative arc from which martyrs are made.

But to think of Nat Nakasa this way misses an important point: resistance to apartheid was acted out not by symbols but by people, moving through their lives without the moral clarity that historical hindsight affords. Such individuals are not simply shorthand for the injustices of apartheid – they are humans with sprawled and intricate lives that resist easy categorization. And unfortunately for those who would make an idol of Nakasa – or indeed any figure in modern South African history – deification does not hold up well to the scrutiny of detail.

Indeed, studying Nakasa’s life reveals the ideological ambiguities apparent in even the most supposedly black and white conflict in contemporary world history, the Cold War. By the time he died, the South African and American governments had staked opposing claims to his position on communism, a system he had never either explicitly supported or disavowed. In South Africa, where the apartheid government employed the term “communist” as a weapon of blunt force against its detractors, it was aimed promiscuously at nearly anyone who challenged National Party authority, including writers like Nakasa. For the United States on the other hand, a literary

83 This piece of legislation, the Protection of Information Bill, was passed in the National Assembly on 22 November 2011 by a vote of 229 to 107. As of the publication of this article, it was awaiting approval from the National Council of Provinces. Under the legislation’s provisions, journalists who write about classified information can be subject to a prison term of up to twenty-five years. Faranaaz Parker, ‘Black Tuesday: Secrecy Bill Passed in Parliament’, *The Mail and Guardian Online*, 22 November 2011. Accessed 22 November 2011. <http://bit.ly/v8yCfe>

84 Jeff Radebe, ‘Speech at the 2010 SANEF Awards Dinner’, Politics Web, 26 July 2010. Accessed 4 April, 2011. <http://bit.ly/g7EXIJ>

85 Peter McDonald, ‘The Present is Another Country’, LitNet, 13 September 2010. Accessed 4 April 2011. <http://bit.ly/hciaOb>

86 Pippa Green, ‘Nat Nakasa, Symbol of Exile’s Loneliness’, *The Sunday Independent*, 17 July, 1999. Accessed 10 February 2011. <http://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/nat-nakasa-symbol-of-exile-s-loneliness-1.5760>

intellectual, seemingly more committed to rhetoric than outright revolution, could actually serve as a moderating force against communist takeover. In theory, both governments had the same enemy. In practice, specific national interests sometimes overrode the particulars of ideology.

Neither was the link between Nakasa's life and apartheid simple or static. The 1948 election marked a turning point – for his life and for his country – only in retrospect. For several years afterward, apartheid remained a developing vision, lacking both the rigidity and sense of permanence that would later come to define it. In many ways, it cohered only as individuals resisted it, not just through large-scale protests and strikes, but also via insidious, indirect challenges of the kind Nakasa defined himself by. As apartheid pressed down on black society, Nakasa challenged it simply by keeping a detailed and highly personal record of its existence. These small acts grated against the National Party's vision of a neatly divided South Africa, forcing it to develop increasingly methodical means for snuffing out resistance over the course of the 1950s and 1960s.

But while apartheid drew the boundaries tighter and tighter around Nakasa's personal and professional world, it also lent his life a powerful sense of purpose. Nakasa and the other *Drum* writers defined themselves in large part by the fact that they moved outside the prescribed bounds of the apartheid state. Living on the edge of what was permissible gave them their voice, lending a persistent feeling of exigency to both their careers and their personal lives. No staunchly defined moral code dictated their actions. Instead, as men of privilege in African society, they simply attempted to take what their upbringing had taught them they were entitled to. But it also meant that their attempts to subvert apartheid lacked the coherence and organization of the opposition movement, and apartheid was eventually able to chip away at their dissident community until, by the mid-1960's, it was a shell of its former self.

Indeed, when *The Classic* published a commemorative issue in honour of Nakasa eight months after his death, the editors had to go through each copy of the magazine with a razorblade and slice out a tribute to Nakasa by Can Themba, who had been banned as a 'statutory communist' in the time between editing and publication.⁸⁷ Themba himself would die in exile in Swaziland in 1968 from the effects of his alcoholism. Renowned composer and *Drum* writer Todd Matshikiza passed away under similar circumstances the same year in Zambia, and others followed. Like Nakasa, the possibilities of life outside apartheid South Africa had not been enough to remedy the isolation and loss of professional and personal grounding they experienced. 'The writer can take his choice,' he once wrote, 'bow to social conventions ... and keep within the confines of the white world, or refuse to let officialdom regulate his personal life, face the consequences, and be damned.'⁸⁸

87 Themba's tribute was meant to follow a poem by William Plomer, 'The Taste of the Fruit', which commemorated Nakasa and the Afrikaans poet Ingrid Jonker, who committed suicide the same week as he did. The piece, entitled 'The Boy with the Tennis Racket', was later published in *The World of Nat Nakasa* by Ravan Press (1975); 'Insert', *The Classic*, 1,1 (1963), 7; Barney Simon, 'My Years With *The Classic*: A Note', 78.

88 Nat Nakasa, 'On Writing in South Africa', *The World of Nat Nakasa* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2005), 86.