

“Fugitive Pieces: Es’kia Mphahlele and the African Diaspora”

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Two seemingly unrelated remarks by one of Es’kia Mphahlele’s most perceptive commentators, Peter Thuynsma, will provide our point of departure. The first is that Mphahlele is “the first black South African to be so truly international,” and the second, that “it should have come as little surprise that he eventually returned ‘to lay his shadow on ancestral soil’” (Thuynsma, “Introduction” 1; “Textures” 101).¹ That it should have come as little surprise that Mphahlele would return from exile so controversially--breaking the cultural boycott of those years--is a judgement Thuynsma elicits from a sympathetic reading of Mphahlele’s longer fiction of the exiled period, particularly *The Wanderers*. But Thuynsma’s observations can be allowed to represent a larger pattern, for they define an essential paradox in Mphahlele’s career.

In Es’kia Mphahlele we have the most sustained record in South African literature of the encounter between a black South African writer and the cultures of the wider African diaspora. Over a twenty-year period, between 1957 and 1977, he engaged with each of the major centres of intellectual ferment in the black world, in West and East Africa, with exiled francophone Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States. With the exception of the Caribbean where he was an intellectual, rather than an actual, traveler (with a particular affinity, it seems, for Martinique) he lived and worked as a cultural activist in these centres of literary volatility when they were either nascent or still flourishing. In Nigeria, he was a co-founder of the Mbari Writers and Artists Club and co-editor of the seminal *Black Orpheus*; in Kenya, through the Chemchemi Creative Centre, he sought to reproduce the successes of Mbari in East Africa; in Paris, his problematic earlier encounter with the

apologists of *négritude* would mellow through contact with Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire and others; at the University of Pennsylvania he would work alongside such prominent African-American writers as Sonia Sanchez and Houston Baker and he would deepen his immersion in the black American tradition notably, though not exclusively, the Harlem Renaissance. But as it emerges from Mphahlele's fiction, autobiography, and particularly--where there has been less critical attention--his scholarship or critical writing, this was a complex, shifting, even ambivalent encounter, and one (I shall argue) in which Mphahlele's restlessness and irresolution, and ultimately his decision to return, have more than purely personal significance.

If it is not altogether surprising (given what emerges from the exiled writing) that Mphahlele should have returned in 1977, it is equally unsurprising that he should have left in the first place, considering what he had been through. In *Down Second Avenue* he describes the sense of release on arriving in Nigeria in September 1957, in terms of "having just climbed down from a vehicle that has been rocking violently for countless miles" (218). The rocking included, *inter alia*, years of professional harassment having been banned from teaching because of his opposition to Bantu Education, followed by the precipitous opportunism of life as a journalist and fiction editor on *Drum* magazine. Shortly before his departure, he had to undergo the properly Kafkaesque process (as we shall see) of petitioning for a passport in regular visits to the Union Buildings in Pretoria. The menacing imbecility of officialdom would have been pure gall to Mphahlele, crystallizing years of accumulating resentment.

Imagine the scene described in *Down Second Avenue*, of Mphahlele being called before the C.I.D. Chief in whose gift the granting of a passport lay, a passport to a more secure professional life, and beckoning intellectual horizons. From formerly secret records in Pretoria's State Archives we

can now deduce that the Chief would have had sight of the following statements from security officers who had been attending meetings Mphahlele had addressed:

Op 9.1.1955 het hy hom as volg op 'n vergadering van die "Orlando Rents Protection Association" uitgelaat [at this meeting he expressed himself as follows]: "Slaves of Africa, I am one of those teachers who were expelled from the Orlando High School because the Government said I was a Communist. I appeal to you Orlando people to bring your children to me and do not send your children to the Government Schools. Bring your children to me they will be taught within three months, then they will be men and women of the future. I will also take them to Pretoria and will tell them that when they pass the [Voortrekker] monument they must spit at it instead of kneeling down and pray to the European God. They must rather pray to Chaka, Dingaan, Motshoetshoe and Sikukuni."

Op 26.6.1955 laat hy hom op 'n vergadering van die sogenaamds "Congress of the People" as volg uit [he expressed himself as follows]: "Bantu Education is the most dirtiest thing you can think of. Your children are being taught that Chaka was a murderer. A cultural organization must be opened for the black man, coloured and other Non-European friends. This culture must not leave room for Nationalists and we shall have a Nationalism in a Democratic form. I refuse to live in Group Areas. We want equal rights but I want to be better than the white man. We reject Bantu Education. We want to make the European unfit and we do not recognise his leadership anymore. There are a number of Europeans in this country who are joining us in our Democratic fight. Music and dancing and many other

things can be the cause of Justice....” (State Archives, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Ref. 1144/301)

Mphahlele’s opposition to the abuses of Bantu Education is filtered by this agent’s racism as a peculiar kind of animism, but more excruciating is the fact that Mphahlele’s efforts at the Kliptown Congress--the event which produced the Freedom Charter--to promote democratic non-racialism are simply not understood. (Little did this policeman know that one day his children would depend on the triumph of Mphahlele’s position.) Mphahlele’s association with *Drum*, where he was fiction editor at the time, did not help his cause, since “‘The Drum’ (sic) is ‘n uiters giftige tydskrif what hoofsaaklik vir die nie-blanke leser gedoel is en hou niks goeds vir die Staat in nie” (*Drum* is an extremely poisonous magazine intended mainly for the non-white reader and contains nothing of any benefit to the State). Indeed, the files show that the application for a passport sewed considerable confusion in Pretoria. It was first approved by the Native Commissioner, then turned down by the Department of Internal Affairs on the recommendation of the Department of Native Affairs and the Police. The disagreement led to correspondence being addressed to the relevant Minister, whose officials debated whether Mphahlele would do more harm inside or outside the country, though they did refuse the passport. Then, mysteriously, the Police seem to have had a change of mind, because they recommended to Internal Affairs that the decision be reversed. This prompted inquiries from Native Affairs as to why, given the obvious “linksgesindheid en kommunistiese neigings” of the applicant (left-wing and communist tendencies), he should be allowed to leave the country. The reply from the Police, as annotated by the inquirer in Native Affairs, takes the form of a particularly crude exercise of power: they believed they could use Mphahlele as an agent. There is nothing in the files which might serve as the basis for this proposition, nor is there any evidence of Mphahlele’s

acceding to it. If we read between the lines of Mphahlele's own account of these negotiations, it is possible to conclude that what earned him the passport (not without a cliffhanger, since it was issued a day before his departure), in addition to the intercession of a black Dutch Reformed Church minister, was the dissonance evident to the "cultured" C.I.D. Chief (by Mphahlele's account) between the man sitting before him and the intellectual poverty of some of his colleagues, not to mention the reporting of his underlings. It is also possible that the notion of Mphahlele's being used by the State was circulated by the same official to justify his decision to support the application. In which case, this policeman cuts an interesting figure: he does the right thing but has to account for his actions in a climate of corruption. Certainly, the correspondence is a bitter reminder, if one were needed, of the internecine complexity and hubristic arrogance of the official web in Pretoria that determined the fortunes of black intellectuals at the time. After making Mphahlele endure a lengthy, hand-wringing monologue about the good intentions of the State, the Chief sent Mphahlele on his way to take up a teaching appointment, first at the C.M.S. Grammar School then, in the extension programme of the University of Ibadan. (*Down Second Avenue* 208-209).

As its Epilogue explains, the second half of *Down Second Avenue* was written in the afterglow of this release: "I'm breathing the new air of freedom ... I shall soon know what to do with [it]" (220). Having left a kind of renaissance at home, that associated with the *Drum* generation, Mphahlele entered another one, represented by Mbari and *Black Orpheus*. The following three years, which saw the publication in quick succession of *Down Second Avenue* and the first edition of *The African Image*, and brief visits to Ghana, France and the United States, established Mphahlele as a public intellectual on the diasporic circuit, the first major consequence of which was that in 1961 he would move to Paris to become Director of the Africa Programme of the Congress for Cultural

Freedom.

West Africa, however, he would later say (in 1984), “gave Africa back to me” (*Afrika My Music* 26). But what adjustments did this actually entail? What emerges from the record of the intellectual encounters of these years suggests that Mphahlele was in fact struggling to adjust himself to, at times even resist, particular constructions of Africanity with which he had little intuitive affinity. In *Afrika My Music* (once again) he would later say that a “solid sediment of Africanness” was taken for granted in South Africa, even repressed, “in order that we might deal with the cruelties of the present,” adding that the Congress tradition abetted such repression in its desire to counter the campaign of forced ethnicization in apartheid (29). One might add that the ethos of *Drum*, and the 1950s awakening in general, would have reinforced a distrust of ethnicity, encouraging as it did a fierce embrace of cosmopolitan modernity, against the intentions of the State which were to imprison people in time-capsules of traditional identity. But in Nigeria, Mphahlele says, “we came full circle. We knew that we had begun the Panafrican odyssey: shades of Orpheus” (29). The epic and somewhat foreboding allusions here point to how difficult the adjustment would prove to be.

The most dramatic of the conflictual moments was undoubtedly the famous *cris de coeur* on the subject of *négritude* at a conference in Dakar on the place of African literature in the university curriculum. Mphahlele’s scepticism about *négritude* had been accumulating for some years prior to this explosion, indeed since at least 1959 when, on returning to Ibadan after a period of leave in London, he had digressed to Paris where, with the artist Gerard Sekoto, he had met with the men of *Présence Africaine*, including Alioune Diop, Rabemananjara, and others. The mission, as reported in the first edition of *The African Image*, was to ask the négritudinists of the Society of African Culture, “Where do *we* come in--we, who are detribalized and are producing a proletarian art?” The

visit apparently included a two-hour lecture from the South Africans on their country's history, the purpose of which was to explain that the black South African intellectual's experience was one of urban restlessness and cross-cultural synthesis (*African Image* [1962] 27-28). Subsequently, the editors of *Présence Africaine* were gracious enough to publish a version of Mphahlele's vindication, in "Negro culture in a multi-racial society in Africa." But by 1963, Mphahlele's impatience had fomented into a formidable stew:

Who is so stupid as to deny the historical fact of *négritude* as both a protest and a positive assertion of African values? All this is valid. What I do not accept is the way in which too much of the poetry inspired by it romanticizes Africa--as a symbol of innocence, purity, and artless primitiveness. I feel insulted when some people imply that Africa is not also a violent Continent. I am a violent person, and proud of it because it is often a healthy human state of mind; someday I'm going to plunder, rape, set things of fire; I'm going to cut someone's throat; I'm going to subvert a government; I'm going to organize a *coup d'etat*; yes, I'm going to oppress my own people; I'm going to hunt down the rich fat black men who bully the small, weak black men and destroy them; I'm going to become a capitalist, and woe to all who cross my path or who want to be my servants or chauffeurs and so on; I'm going to lead a breakaway church--there is money in it; I'm going to attack the black bourgeoisie while I cultivate a garden, rear dogs and parrots; listen to jazz and classics, read "culture" and so on. Yes, I'm also going to organise a strike. Don't you know that sometimes I kill to the rhythm of drums and cut the sinews of a baby to cure it of paralysis? ... The image of Africa consists of all these and others.... The omission of these elements of a continent in turmoil

reflects a defective poetic vision. The greatest poetry of Léopold Sédar Senghor is that which portrays in himself the meeting point of Europe and Africa. This is the most realistic and honest and most meaningful symbol of Africa--an ambivalent continent searching for equilibrium. This synthesis of Europe and Africa does not necessarily reject the negro-ness of the African. ... An image of Africa that only glorifies our ancestors and celebrates our "purity" and "innocence" is an image of a continent lying in state. ("A Reply" 23-24)

Primitivism, it seems, can be valued positively or negatively: in reacting against *négritude*'s overt lyricism, Mphahlele came dangerously close to defending something resembling the opposite, which would be irrational violence. The more sober version of the argument Mphahlele was working towards, appeared later in *The African Image* (1962); indeed, the critical narrative implied in the sequence of essays in *The African Image* amounts to a vindication of the South African case, an elaborated record, in a sense, of the lecture given by the men from Johannesburg in the offices of *Présence Africaine*.

These essays begin with a brisk assessment of Kwame Nkrumah's version of the "African Personality," which is seen as a useful, even inspiring political instrument but a false slogan for an artist, especially one from a ghetto in a multi-racial society (23). The francophone cousin of Nkrumah's thesis is addressed in "What Price 'Négritude'?" which distinguishes between *négritude* and the "proletarian" art of South Africa, the ambience of which includes jazz, Hollywood, ballroom dancing, football, etc. By gathering a mass of detail, in fact, from those forms of cultural life which thrive in the midst of South Africa's history of urbanization, industrialization, bureaucratization, and segregation, Mphahlele produces an account of what he would later call "a fugitive culture"--the

implications of which term I shall return to later.

In “Roots,” he examines the images of Africa in the work of African-Americans, where he senses the emergence of a sustained tradition, unlike the Caribbean where, he argues (somewhat anecdotally), the image of Africa is more problematic. What interests Mphahlele in African-American writing is this: what happens when the writers emerge at the other end of the process which begins with lyrical myths about Africa being complicated by a certain amount of contact, when African-Americans, in other words, effect the return to the United States after a flirtation with Africa, and embrace the painful necessities of carving a cultural identity and sense of vocation out of heartless America. The process is traced through Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin. Mphahlele’s purposes, however, really emerge when he declares, “If [the ‘native son’] finds the American civilization frustrating, he should realize that it is not a parochial malady. Everywhere, especially in Africa, we are up against this invasion by the white world against our sense of values” (52). In other words, for Mphahlele there is something paradigmatic in the African-American experience, a reality which is traduced in more romantic constructions of Africa, but one which he is able intuitively, because of his particular experience, to recognize. Our “French-speaking brothers ... just don’t seem to know the social forces at work in African countries south of the Equator. They are too often apt to bring a philosophical mind to political and cultural questions in a changing continent” (53). Indeed, it may be argued that the “image studies” which comprise the more literary portions of *The African Image*—based on his Masters thesis for the University of South Africa on “The Non-European Character in South African English Literature”—implicitly affirm the principles of cultural contact and synthesis, or at least, the idea of history keeping identities in *flux*, which is Mphahlele’s theme for most of the book. After all, one investigates stereotypes on the

assumption that they may be sublimated. The first edition of *The African Image* is therefore, *inter alia*, Mphahlele's apology for the South African intellectual's estrangement in the face of *négritude* which was, at the time, the most talked-about of intellectualizations of identity in the black world.

The second, 1974 edition of *The African Image* would prove to be quite different. But before turning to it, we need to assess the most significant work on the intervening years, *The Wanderers*, the novel which he submitted as the thesis component of his PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Denver. The unpublished thesis carries a curious subtitle: "a novel of Africa." The preposition is ambiguous, pointing both to the subject matter of the novel and to its source, the fictional setting, and the condition from which it springs. Africa is, indeed, both subject and object, implying that the subject-position from which it is written straddles a boundary between inside and outside. But the complexities multiply: certainly, Mphahlele is the insider who is outside, the African in the West, but more crucially—as he had been in *The African Image*—he is the South African in the American reaches of the diaspora. As in the essays, therefore, Mphahlele is offering a self-vindication, but since *The Wanderers* deals with the years of exile on the African continent itself, the emphasis falls not on *négritude* but on the assumption, held no doubt partly by Mphahlele himself, but held, too, by all those united to some degree by a loosely conceived pan-Africanism, namely, that Africa *ought* to be able to embrace the refugee brother from the South. That he presented this performance to an American readership (and PhD committee) in Denver, would have made the argument appear oddly framed and directed, no doubt.

The Wanderers is essentially about the bitterness and sense of futility that accumulate in the life of the intellectual as refugee in Africa. Implicitly, it provides a retrospective explanation for

Mphahlele's departure from Africa, having spent the years 1957-1966 working as a cultural activist and teacher in Nigeria and Kenya, and his venturing into what would ordinarily be considered a state of more severe exile in the United States. That the continent should fail to provide a sense of belonging to a South African on the run from apartheid, was something that needed explaining, both before the court of the diaspora and, as I hinted earlier, before the court of Mphahlele himself. But as Timi Tabane, the novel's chief protagonist realizes during his West African exile, his "was a present that had gathered into its womb all the gall of the past. A past that came down to Timi's times with little or no romance ..." (*The Wanderers* 249).

The event with which the novel begins and ends is the death of Tabane's son, Felang, in a raid by troops of the Congress of Liberation through the border of Zimbabwe. Felang joins the Congress not, in the first instance, we are told, out of political commitment, but to compensate for failed relationships at home and a chequered school career, both of which give his parents much anguish. The son's failure is attributed to the family's, especially the father's, nomadism, and his death provides tragic release for the guilt and bitterness which accumulate in the father in his exile. There is sufficient evidence to note, as Thuynsma suggests, that the material for this relationship is directly autobiographical, reflecting Mphahlele's relationship with his own son, Anthony ("Textures" 94). The connection prompts Lewis Nkosi to ask the rather caustic question relating to Felang's death, "is this perhaps a case of symbolic infanticide?" (*Tasks and Masks* 97). Nkosi's demolition of *The Wanderers* in *Tasks and Masks* is founded on his knowledge of the biographical material, which by Nkosi's own admission, makes it difficult for him to assess the work as fiction: "The difficulty is compounded by the feeling we get quite early on in the novel that the author is out to settle scores with rivals and to vindicate himself at the expense of contemporaries whose

personalities he did not like, whose careers he held in contempt, whose work he found trivial compared to his own” (98). So much of the novel owes its existence, Nkosi says, to the self-congratulatory presentation of the hero, who is close to Mphahlele himself, that it fails to rise to “the level of art.” His criterion is the following: “there is nothing wrong with autobiographical novels as long as the lives of the people involved are recast in a new and vivid light in such a way as to reveal some imaginative purpose or central design” (94).

Nkosi’s laconic reading is too severe, because the narrative does, in fact, have a discernible symbolic design, one which goes further than Thuynsma’s apt but limited conclusion that it “registers his encounters in exile, not merely as self-indulgence, but as critical assessment” (101). What is that assessment, and by what core metaphor (to deploy Nkosi’s criterion) is it defined? The inescapable assessment Thuynsma is working towards is this: the existential failure of pan-Africanism to support the intellectual refugee. The metaphor which carries this conclusion is the death and dismemberment of the son, which speaks of the protagonist’s guilt and leaves Tabane stranded without continuity or a sense of the future. For Tabane’s severance from his past and from home is also a severance from his future, and the distress associated with the son’s death is all the more bitter for being metonymically linked to the void represented by the failed promises of the continent.

Throughout the novel, in fact, Tabane is plagued by memories and a recurring dream in which he is a fugitive. He is haunted by the memory of a mounted policeman towering over him, an icon of apartheid, “the badge on his helmet [glittering] mercilessly” (109), while as a young herdboy he drank from a stream. The dream, which persists over the entire nine years covered by the novel, involves his being pursued by a “gang of thugs” who cannot at first be identified, though

by the time of the son's death it emerges that they are young, black South Africans (215, 319, 336). The course of the dream through Tabane's psyche suggests a process in which the threat of a brutal, external power is gradually internalized and turned into guilt, since the attackers are men like Felang whom he, as father, has failed. These events represent the fulfilment of the earlier foreboding that the present would produce a monstrous birth from "the gall of the past" (249). The novel's opening sequence does seem gratuitously violent, in representing the bodies of the young freedom fighters being torn apart by crocodiles after being dumped in a river by mercenaries. But by the end of the novel we come to appreciate that the dismemberment is chiefly psychic, a stripping of illusion in the consciousness of the narrator himself: "I sensed that, in fact, his age--twenty--was less significant than the way he died," says Tabane, "at the time when the wound in us gaped and defied any protection from the storm or the heat of emotion" (12).

Apart from this central metaphor, the narrative is organized around the development of Tabane's consciousness as he comes to terms with exile in three phases. The first exile is internal, taking place within the country of birth. Tabane is a reporter for *Bongo* magazine who agrees to investigate the disappearance of a prisoner on a potato farm, Glendale, outside the town of Goshen in what is recognisable today as Mpumalanga or the Lowveld (Mphahlele is, of course, fictionalizing Henry Nxumalo's famous exposés of prisons and prison farms in *Drum*). The landscape brings a sense of crisis to Tabane: "huge patches of squalor, of abject poverty, large numbers of people who were being moved about in whole communities; there was a large number of blind alleys; there were areas of heroism, of cowardice, both despicable and divine. The issue kept coming to the single conscience, like the endless ticking of a clock" (59). The phenomenology of a landscape "corroded with power" focuses a sense of crisis and decision: if Tabane stays in the country, he must pit himself

against the machine or shrivel up in bitterness; he must “face up to [his] cowardice, reason with it and leave” (59). Interestingly, the temptation to sublimate this crisis by posing as the modernist émigré, a refugee of the soul, is rejected: “things mattered only in relation to the time and place that contained them” (59). He decides to leave.

Tabane’s arrival in Sogali repeats *Down Second Avenue*’s testimony of relief when Mphahlele reached Lagos. But very quickly, a sense of ambivalence accumulates, producing a dissonance which reminds Tabane that he is always a “black foreigner” (229). The adjustments--comprising the burden of the narrative for the period spent in West Africa--include coping with the country’s first *coup d’etat*, being bribed over a traffic offence, being led into keeping servants and complaining about them in the way white South Africans do, negotiating hellish roads in the course of travelling to teaching appointments, and coming close to witnessing a thief being torn limb from limb in a public street. Such experiences, coupled with a failure to establish easy professional relationships, produce little amelioration of the violent impulses which were a feature of living in the burdensome south (230). Extraordinarily, the sense of alienation even includes a sequence in which Tabane and his group of cosmopolitan male peers visit the juju high-life clubs of Sogali, where class and cultural differences seem so severe that he imagines himself as the white frontiersman (247). “Take your chances, tread softly,” he subsequently muses in self-admonishment,

“human cultures have stone walls. Find the crevice and dig your way through that and don’t try to go further than it allows you. Africa has several enclaves with walls around them and several crevices in the walls. Take your chances. ... maybe humanity must flow like water

that cannot leave a crevice unflooded.” (248)

Indeed there are no “ancestral springs” to unite him with Sogali, despite the theatrical recreations of myth and cosmology he watches with his peers--shades of the activities of the Mbari club--since his ancestors “had thrived in other climes.” With a quasi-Joycean ring we are told that the “present had to be met not with the lyricism of the tongue, of the spoken word, but with the gun, with political cunning and a lashing tongue” (248).

Much of the third stage of exile, where Tabane is a university teacher of literature in Kambani, Lao-Kiku (clearly Nairobi, Kenya), is devoted to Felang’s disintegration. Where we are presented with Tabane’s own further development, it is to show us his disillusionment with the Eurocentrism of the East African elite--particularly when his teaching contract is not renewed. “Africa is still a white man’s paradise,” he thinks, “not a black exile’s” (339-340). At an official function to open a new hospital on the escarpment of the Rift Valley, he hears a note of defeat in the drumming and the feet of the dancers, and imagines a troop of weary warriors from the south moving up the Valley, the implication being that the history of Southern Africa is continuous with that of post-independent East Africa: “Why does that music sound so plaintive? Where’s the roar of triumph, the triumph of black rule?” (340-341, 347). Under neocolonial conditions, he realizes, Lao-Kiku will not be able to embrace him and there will be no release from his anger. Perhaps at some point in the future he will return to Iboyoru, but not immediately: “Meantime, I must wait somewhere outside Africa, contemplate the painful south and what I can do about it” (347). When his wife breaks this reverie, telling him that his face “looks like [he’d] been out with witches ... or seen a monster in the Valley” (348), she is quite correct: he is confronting the inescapable reality of

his exile from the continent.

At this point in the narration, Mphahlele's novel exhausts itself. Felang's death--we are peremptorily told--occurs seven months later. Since there is no narration covering the intervening period, it is at this point that the loss of the son and the demise of the pan-African solution become irrevocably linked. Mphahlele's biographer, N. Chabani Manganyi, seeks a more consoling view of Felang's death than the one I offer here, written largely in response to Nkosi. Confirming the novel's autobiographical tendency, Manganyi suggests that the passage of the father-son relationship into fiction enabled Mphahlele to "move closer to contemplating revolutionary violence as a solution to the problem of white racism" (224). While this reading is understandable in terms of the biographer's need to find wholeness in the disparate elements of his subject's life, and is made plausible by the context of Black Consciousness in which it was written, there is actually little evidence to support it from the novel. Indeed, Felang's disintegration brings a repetition of the title's motif: "We are wanderers" (346), a refrain which begins during Tabane's realization of his foreignness in Sogali: "Darkness, the darkness of exile, the long long road, a road full of wanderers, wanderers of no fixed abode" (229-230). This rootlessness and Felang's dismemberment remain painfully connected to the end. And Felang's death does not bring the consolation of tragic sacrifice, as Manganyi implies: by the time it occurs, the family bonds have become irremediably torn, and without adequate motivation for Felang's joining the Congress of Liberation in the first place, it is a case of the best lacking all conviction (the phrase from Yeats's "The Second Coming" which Mphahlele uses as his epigraph to *Down Second Avenue*). In his preface to the dissertation, Mphahlele actually defends the *irresolution* of his text, claiming that it is apt for the condition which it explores. That condition, which is an enigma only if we assume the inherent capacity of the

continent to provide a literal or ideological home, is one of rootlessness, shading into aimlessness; without a consolatory myth to assuage the pangs of exile, it carries a sense of waste. What the death of the son achieves, in fictional terms, is not consolation but a rather brutal realism.

Reviewing the first edition of *The African Image*, Nkosi says, “to be a black South African is to be both unspeakably rich and incredibly poor” (129). Rich, perhaps—though he does not spell this out—because blessed with a dynamic, if anguished sense of community and history; poor, because despite a certain degree of cultural cross-fertilization, “one still suspects that the African has had to shed more of his heritage in order to accommodate himself to the ridiculous, and sometimes barbarous, demands of a society controlled by whites for the benefit of whites” (*Home and Exile* 129). By the time Mphahlele came to revise *The African Image* for re-publication in 1974, he seems to have reached the same conclusion, with the result that his critical narrative had to be entirely turned around--re-aligned, in fact, by a hundred-and-eighty degrees.

Perhaps the most startling evidence of the *volte face* the second edition represents is provided by the chapters on nationalism. In the first edition, Mphahlele declared that he was not a nationalist, that he was opposed to “medieval clannishness,” going so far as to say that he had never been moved by Anton Lembede’s slogan “Africa for the Africans” which had inspired the Youth League and contributed to the development of Africanism within the ANC, and eventually the formation of the Pan-Africanist Congress. Africanism in this form, he declared, was “unwittingly joining the Afrikaans [sic] in their ambition to create parallel streams of legislative, political, economic and cultural growth: separate trade unions, places of entertainment—the lot” (1st ed. 71-73). Describing the necessity of non-racialism as “cold realism,” meaning a shared destiny was inescapable, he envisioned a future in terms which were anything but coldly real: “We are aiming at a common

society and to prove that multi-racial societies can thrive and become a glorious reality in Africa” (74).

By contrast, in the 1974 edition he would argue, “The white man has done everything to drag into the mud any ideas of non-racialism and it would be futile to try to evoke this ideology at this and at any future time.” While the multi-racial leadership of the Congress alliance pounded the theme of non-racialism, “The rank and file ... were nationalist-minded. They never did think that in an open society the African majority would yield to minority groups.” Even to the Africans in positions of leadership in the alliance, non-racialism was merely a “ploy”: “Still less did the Blacks in the Congress Alliance believe in what they were telling the whites.” “And so we are back to the freedom wars our ancestors of two centuries ago waged against the whites” (52-53). Far from attacking the PAC, as he had done earlier, he now deduced from statements by Nelson Mandela and Robert Sobukwe that “their attitudes towards the other racial groups in South Africa were fundamentally the same; that indeed the nationalism of one was at the root of things the same as that of the other; that in terms of strategy they could both visualize a united front somewhere along the line, of the ANC, the PAC, the Indians and Africans of mixed descent” (56).

The position Mphahlele was beginning to articulate, of course, was becoming increasingly familiar at home as Black Consciousness and indeed, in his preface and elsewhere, he uses the term several times, as well as other BC code-words, notably Boer in reference to whites in general, including the English. Not all of BC’s lexicon was taken over in the same way, though: “these college-boy theorists who broke away from the Pan-Africanist Congress and who indulge in naming antics must retract the name ‘Azania’ which they arbitrarily gave South Africa, a name some misguided Afro-American militants have also adopted” (58). Ripples of BC’s explosive vocabulary

were reaching him, therefore, and he was adjusting to them, selectively. The challenge Mphahlele seems to have had to confront in the second edition of *The African Image* is that having repudiated racial thought so volubly early in his career, various factors, historical and personal, were driving him towards a *rapprochement*. These factors are not too difficult to enumerate: the hardening of apartheid as it moved towards totalitarianism; in this context, the failure of multi-racial alliance politics; the rise of a properly revolutionary discourse as a feature of the movement in exile; the emergence of BC at home. Added to this, the pressures of exile itself seem to have fed the racial bitterness:

There is something about the act and fact of communal survival *inside* a situation of racism that either tones down, or lends another complexion to, the hate that is mixed with anger. *Outside* the situation, you are on your own, you have little communal support: at best, it is intellectual. So you hate the whites you left behind with a scalding intensity. Could it be that distance creates a void and that the burning lava of hate *must* fill it? (42)

Surely, one must also assume that the influence of those very streams of identitarian thinking which he had earlier found so exclusive of his own, peculiar history, began to have an effect, especially since his circumstances in the United States were those of a member of racial minority which has to look deep within itself to find the resources to survive. Indeed, there is ample evidence, both in the second edition of *The African Image* and in *Voices in the Whirlwind* of a sustained intellectual search on Mphahlele's part for points of contact between his own particular sense of racial identity and those of diasporic origin. The path he had to walk in finding these points, of course, was littered

with evidence of his own previous volatility, particularly with respect to *négritude*. Mphahlele's later position on this question, therefore, entails opening *négritude* to diverse historical circumstances and interpretations—repeating Césaire's *chacun à sa négritude propre*—and then plotting this diversity in terms of a continuum between two poles, with the lyricism of Senghor at one end, and at the other, forms of black consciousness which are in tune with the realities of power. Mphahlele aligns himself with the latter end of this continuum, and does so by invoking a Fanonist position which ties the problematics of racial identity to a vision of an ongoing social revolution sustained by the struggle for independent nationhood.

Apart from Frantz Fanon, the other Martiniquan whose work enabled Mphahlele to re-situate himself in relation to *négritude* was, of course, Aimé Césaire. Césaire's account of *négritude* was always “historical rather than dogmatic,” says Mphahlele; he “kept returning to [it] as a weapon against power” (93). That Mphahlele should declare a truce with *négritude* by invoking these two figures is not altogether surprising, if we take as our point of reference Abiola Irele's assessment of them. Irele describes a shift in Césaire's poetry from collective identity to social consciousness, a movement still more acutely and sharply defined, of course, in Fanon, suggesting that a Martiniquan take on *négritude* carried the philosophy from the fields of aesthetics and black subjectivity, to ideology and secular, social critique (142-143). Mphahlele's revisiting of racial identity may, therefore, not have been a complete break with the restless historicity that he had earlier associated with his South African background, since a synthesis was being sought between a black and an urban or secular self-consciousness. Citing René Dépestre, Mphahlele concludes his discussion of *négritude* by saying that the unifying elements in constructions of the philosophy in the Caribbean, Africa and the Americas were historical first, rather than racial, and that *négritude* is essentially “the

modern (cultural) equivalent of the old condition of the fugitive slave” (95). In the figure of the fugitive, therefore, Mphahlele’s South African and diasporic selves could become one.

Whereas the critical narrative, then, of the first edition of *The African Image* explained to the black world the South African position of Congress affiliation, that of the second edition was more inwardly directed, being principally a series of reflections on the growth of racial self-consciousness; as such, it was in tune with BC’s quest for black self-reconstruction. The way Mphahlele’s prose bends back on itself around the word “Except” in the following passage, is typical of this shift:

We had to grab the tools by which the white man pillaged and plundered his way to power. The arms, we couldn’t have. Education we could have, albeit literally at a price. With education went the mastery of English We had jazz, we had European music. European music was in an uncanny way a symbol of conquest for the individual. It took one to far-away lands where we imagined ourselves elevated above the tyranny around us. Jazz also spoke to us of an imaginary land where Blacks were achieving things we couldn’t dream of. Except that jazz also grounded us deeper in our Black experience because we did sense its other dimension: a state of mind rooted in a life that knew slave ships, whips, back-breaking labor, break-up of family life, alienation, and so on. (27)

The project of the second edition involved establishing a position of black self-definition, but this had to be accomplished without traducing the historical reality of a transcultural existence. The resolution of this tension which emerges in key passages entails a “dialogue,” a culture which is both “synthetic” (transcultural) and “self-sufficient” (African):

It comprises among other things the continuous dialogue between the present and the living traditions that first inspired the negritude movement; the imperatives of our modern existence and those we have inherited from our ancestors; the colonial oppression and white racism that still harass our people in Southern Africa; the several cycles South Africans have lived through in their encounter with whites; out of which has evolved a synthetic but self-sufficient native culture, a living culture that is quite adequate to our political imperatives This dialogue will certainly determine in time the direction of our literature. (84)

This synthesis introduces us to Mphahlele's notion of "African humanism," a feature of his writing after his return to South Africa, but it is worth observing that the resolution which emerges in the second edition of *The African Image* came only after a considerable struggle, part of which is reflected in *Voices in the Whirlwind and Other Essays* (1972). These essays, in fact, come between the two editions of *The African Image*, having been written in the mid-sixties while he was still a doctoral candidate at the University of Denver, teaching black literature. The title essay, on poetry written out of situations of racialized political conflict, is a sober assessment of the prospects of Black Aesthetics, so sober, indeed, that it attracted unfavourable attention from one of the spokespersons of that poetics, Addison Gayle; nevertheless, what is self-evident in this and the other essays of the collection is that Mphahlele is immersing himself in the cultures of the diaspora in order to find a position which does justice to the several parts of himself. In other essays, he reveals an awareness that the historical subject he represents, and for which he is trying to find an appropriate language, is one of some philosophic importance, involving an attempt to imagine a subject position within African modernity—a case, really, of ideas catching up with reality.

In an essay on rivalling traditions in African literature, for example, he says, “While I am prepared to stake a lot on the survival of African humanism and the social relationships it informs, Emerson’s voice keeps sounding back of my mind: ‘There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees.’” (150). Similarly, he revisits Sartre’s endorsement of the poets of *négritude*, saying, “The image of Black Orpheus conceived by Sartre in which he dramatizes the black man searching for his Eurydice ... is only part of the story. Because not only is the African present seeking out the past, but the past is seeking out the present” (151). And in an essay on African writers and commitment, he contrasts the modern African subject with the *angst*-ridden modernist subject represented by Kafka--the perspective described by Lukács in terms of “a trapped and struggling fly”--by saying, “At the moment our [African] literature in the European languages is of a frontier kind. We are pioneers at the frontier, seeking a definition of ourselves and the past from which we have come.” Switching the metaphor, he speaks of “the stream of modern life in Africa and the stream of its *living* traditions” (original emphasis) coming together in a dialogue which “may yet determine the idioms of the literature to come” (198).

If the second edition of *The African Image* marks Mphahlele’s gradual adjustment to racial thought, however, this resolution does not bring an equivalent adjustment to the pain of living in exile, despite the fact that his career had reached a highwater mark with an appointment at the University of Pennsylvania. Already in *The African Image* he is contemplating a return, though it comes with fears of having to compromise, fears even of assassination (42-43). At a symposium on contemporary South African literature in Austin, Texas in 1975 which brought together most of the literary exiles in North America, Mphahlele risked reading a poem (“Death III: Variations on a theme by John Keats”) which pointedly confesses to a desire at mid-life to return home before mortality

sets in. Clearly, a philosophical accommodation to a broadly diasporic identity was not a sufficient answer to Mphahlele's existential longing for rootedness, for *place*. In retrospect, Mphahlele speaks of having come to the realization that, "Journalistically, you can establish the connections between the black peoples of the world. You can capture the general mood, the yearnings of militants to assert a Pan-African identity"; nevertheless, a prophet who could speak to all the diverse constituencies of the black world would be a "freak" (*Afrika My Music* 167). "One must sacrifice authenticity somewhere—place—in order to let one's poetry speak for peoples across cultural boundaries" (168).

And so we come to Mphahlele's return. Both as teacher and as writer, particularly of fiction, Mphahlele had arrived at the conclusion that he needed a community and a milieu to which he was viscerally attached. The phrase which has served as an explanation of this decision is "the tyranny of place." The following statement is typical:

I must know whom I'm speaking to. Not place in the theatre of the mind. But a place whose real life I can feel in my blood and bones. There's the rub. I must stay with the South African reality. A reality so deeply rooted in my life that I could never lose it, dare not lose it. That is its tyranny and its value as the root of commitment to culture. ("Exile" 41)

In *Afrika My Music*, Mphahlele says that what he sought in coming back to South Africa, he found: "community," "an identifiable culture," "an ancestral ground." What he lost was "liberty—freedom of association, expression, mobility" (250). The retrospective long view offered here does iron out the difficulties of the return, which we can summarize as calumny, compromise, and contradiction.

He had to endure the calumny of the exiles, some of whom denounced him. As a school inspector in Lebowa, before taking up a fellowship at the University of the Witwatersrand, he had to accept the compromise of working in the very system of Bantu Education which had been the principal reason for his departure twenty years earlier. And contradiction? Yes. The account of a lecture at the University of Lesotho at Roma in 1978 is revealing, where Mphahlele finds himself resenting the assertion of a white woman in the audience who suggested he was negating his political responsibility: "I knew my constituency, to which I was answerable, because I was communicating with it. It was African, and she was not in it as she, a white person, did not share my culture, my constituency's culture" (213). But in the same audience, a group of young refugees, BC activists who had left South Africa in the wake of the Soweto Revolt, were just as vociferous, unsurprisingly, since they were taking on the very role of militant exile that Mphahlele seemed to be abandoning. The constituency in which Mphahlele sought refuge from white arrogance was itself conflicted.

But Mphahlele's attachment to place, and the meaning of place as the vessel in which a community pours its historical experience, ran deeper than such contradictions. And it is here that we discover the larger import of the African humanism which he declares as his manifesto after his return. Mphahlele needed a conceptual frame of reference which was grounded in an intuitive loyalty to his home, but which could, nevertheless, answer to the complexity of his experience in the twenty years of his exile. Having been a committed anti-racist, indeed a non-racist in the Congress tradition, he found himself adrift in West and East Africa, unsupported when it counted, by Pan-Africanism; he then experienced the same sense of alienation from Europe and America which led the intellectuals of an earlier generation--from francophone Africa and the Caribbean--to cling to the mast of *négritude*, and thus he began a journey into the racial self-consciousness he had earlier

declined. But even that journey was inconclusive. Its ambience, we might say, like the source of much of the mythic power of diasporic thought, was the sea, whereas what Mphahlele most needed, he came to realize, was land, place, community, and home, all of which comprised an historical reality. Yet, the experience of landfall would have been bitter-sweet, since he was not returning in triumph as his fellow exiles would seem to be doing on their return at the demise of apartheid. As an umbrella term, African humanism answers, broadly, to Mphahlele's sense of being a creature buffeted by history, a child of modernity, but being, at the same time, in possession of a cultural code which owes nothing to modernity's bland universality.

This blend of an acute sense of history with the knowledge that one is part of a distinctive culture is hard-won in Mphahlele, though it informs his sense more generally of what it means to be a black South African. Towards the end of *Afrika My Music* Mphahlele describes a Soweto funeral procession, complete with footballers loping theatrically between the cars and buses, and a loudspeaker blaring metallic hymns from the roof of the hearse:

In the midst of this I am at pains to extract a meaning. I begin to wonder of the whole show is not an expression of, and at the same time an antidote to despair. So much violence is with us, so much death. To ritualise it, however grotesquely, may be a way of conquering the fear of death, of coaxing it, containing it. I begin to wonder if Soweto, as the paradigm of black South African life, is not striving in its own burlesque fashion to define something of communal experience that the collective memory still cherishes; the disinherited personality trying to salvage something from the collective memory and to give it definition so that people may survive the cruelty of the times. A survival culture, a fugitive culture. (256)

The influence of diasporic thinking is strong here, in the notion of the disinherited personality, the recourse to collective memory to survive history's nightmare, and the culture of survival, yet these reflections also rely on the continuities provided by notions of community and place. Having read and judged diasporic thought with South African eyes, in the early years of his exile, by the time of his return, Mphahlele begins to read and judge South Africa through the lens of the diaspora. To return to the paradox with which we began: whilst Mphahlele's restlessness and his attachment to home are in tension for much of his career, by the time of his return they have reached a mature equilibrium. This equilibrium is as well served by the term African humanism, as any other.

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Notes

1. Mphahlele used the phrase in a letter to Guy Butler from Philadelphia, shortly before his return. (See Butler, "Preface" 5).

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