

Ntongela Masilela

Ezekiel Mphahlele: The Last New African Intellectual of the New African Movement.

But this refunctioning of cultural terminology for historiographic and periodizing purposes runs crucial risks, which may finally be insuperable: in particular, the borrowed aesthetic terms must have the force and willfulness of an estrangement, and not lapse or weaken into yet another form of idealistic history. The cultural component, in other words (borrowed from the Althusserians), must be conceived as a 'dominant' but not a 'determinant'; it must be grasped, not as a set of stylistic features alone, but as a designation of culture, and its logic as a whole (including the proposition that culture itself and its sphere and social function undergo radical and dialectical modifications from one historical moment to another).

-Fredric Jameson, "The Existence of Italy" in *Signatures of the Visible* (1990).

Since the earliest decades of this century, the lure of Harlem has captivated the imagination of writers, artists, intellectuals and politicians around the world. Stories are legion of African-American and African pilgrims progressing to Manhattan then plunging headlong into the ultimate symbolic black cultural space of the city within a city, the 'Mecca of the New Negro' (as Alain Locke put it in 1925) -that Harlem became in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Fidel Castro's recent pilgrimage uptown, recalling to mind his famous sojourn at the Hotel Teresa in 1960, is only the most recent of a long line of such pilgrimages into America's very own heart of darkness. The list of pilgrims is long and distinguished, and includes such varied notables as Max Weber and Carl Jung, Federico Garcia Lorca and Octavio Paz, Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes, Kwame Nkrumah and Wole Soyinka, Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X, Ezekiel Mphahlele and Nelson Mandela. I could go on and on.... Harlem was not so much a place as a state of mind, the cultural metaphor for black America itself.

-Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Harlem on Our Minds" in *Critical Inquiry* (Autumn 1997).

One fundamental importance of Ezekiel Mphahlele (Es'kia after his return from exile in 1977) in South African intellectual and literary history is as a symbolic marker and demarcator of cultural beginnings and endings within the last season of the New African Movement. In this, he is singularly unique, without parallel or comparison within the whole history of the New African Movement from the moment of its launching by Pixley ka Isaka Seme with his extraordinary essay of 1905 ("The Regeneration of Africa") to Ezekiel Mphahlele ("An African Abroad") in 1958.³⁷ The New African Movement was the cultural dominant of the first half of the twentieth-century, despite the paradoxical fact that at the moment of its dominance it was repressed and suppressed by white domination in the form European nationalism(s), in its complex variants from Paul Kruger through Hertzog to Hendrik Verwoed.³⁸ The New African Movement was preoccupied during its cultural splay with three interrelated and inseparable monumental historical projects: constituting the concept of the New African, constructing the foundations of South African modernity, and formulating the principles of African Nationalism and their actualization. The African National Congress (ANC) was the conduit of all these three historical projects: this is the reason why practically all of the major New African intellectuals from John Langibalele Dube through Solomon T. Plaatje to H. Selby Msimang and R. V. Selope Thema radiated within its historical horizon. We purposely name the last two (Msimang and Thema), as an indication that when they left the African National Congress in the early 1950s, for different reasons, for all intents and purposes they self-destructed as intellectuals, despite the fact that Msimang continued writing a column in

³⁷ Pixley ka Isaka Seme, 'The Regeneration of Africa', *Journal of Royal African Society*, vol. 5, 1905-6; Ezekiel Mphahlele, 'An African Abroad: From Johannesburg to Lagos', *Fighting Talk*, December 1957/January 1958.

³⁸ We have attempted to theorize the historical periodization and the intellectual structure of the New African Movement in several documents: 'The TransAtlantic Connections of the new African Movement' (pp. 96) in *Black Modernity: Discourses Between United States and South Africa*, (ed.) Ntongela Masilela (forthcoming, Africa World Press, 2000); 'A Portrait of new Self-Portrait of New African Intellectuals in Modernity: The New African Movement from *Imvo Zabantsundu* Newspaper (1880s) to *Drum Magazine* (1950s) (pp. 109) on our website; The unpublished monograph: *The Modernity of H.I. E. Dhlomo (1903-56): South Africa in the Modern World* (pp. 218) — it has been read Peter Abrahams, Es'kia Mphahlele, Mazisi Kunene, Lewis Nkosi and others. Professor Es'kia Mphahlele has written an Afterword to the monograph; 'The Idea of the African Renaissance and the New African Movement' (pp. 46), in *The Idea of the 'African Renaissance'*, (ed.) Ntongela Masilela (forthcoming, Africa World Press, 2001). Our approximately 600-page Website at Pitzer College, California (which will

ILanga to the late 1970s. In other words, the African National Congress was the political expression of South African historical logic in the era of the making of modernity. This is the reason why during the period of the New African Movement neither the All African Convention (AAC) nor the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM) nor even the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) nor the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) could replace the ANC as the embodiment of the historic will of the African people. Although the New African Movement as a historical tendency was defeated and hence 'terminated' in 1960, for Nelson Mandela, one of the last surviving founders of the ANC Youth League and also one of the last surviving New African intellectuals, 1994 was the historic moment to institute to state power the ideology of the New African Movement's political modernism: African Nationalism (or New Africanism) contra Marxism. The great man's pronouncements, during his presidency 1994-9, of the necessity of an 'African Renaissance' is in actuality a call for the completion of modernity which the New African Movement was unable to fully realize due to white domination and oppression: the idea of the African Renaissance is a call for the rebirth of the cultural and intellectual achievements of the New African Movement, despite it having been politically defeated. One singular aim of the presidency of Nelson Mandela has been an attempt to forge a synthesis between the political modernity and cultural modernity of the New African Movement in the late twentieth century. Whether the historical conditions of possibility will facilitate this realization or dialectical fusion is another matter.

As a member of the Sophiatown Renaissance (the so-called *Drum* writers, since we are concerned here with matters of historical periodization rather than those of the aesthetics of style), the last literary generation of New African intellectuals within the New African Movement, Ezekiel Mphahlele, possessing a much vaster and deeper historical consciousness within his intellectual generation, grappled with the aforementioned triangular field forces of New African modernity. His generational proximity to, for instance Peter Abrahams and Jordan Kush Ngubane, who were not members of the

not be operative until April 2000) called 'New African Intellectuals in South Africa' is essentially about the New African Movement.

Sophiatown group despite noble efforts to include them therein, also accounts for his sensitivity to the project of South African modernity, in contrast to his *Drum* colleagues who were at least a decade younger than himself.³⁹

³⁹ Three New African intellectuals have sketched authoritative of the New African Movement, though neither of them has designated their sketches as such. The first is by Z.K. Matthews, 'Our Heritage', *Imvo Zabantsundu*, from June 3rd to November 21st, 1961. This extraordinary intellectual and political gallery encompasses: The Jabavu Family, A Struggle Against the 1925 Bills, Davidson Don Tengo Jabavu, Solomon T. Plaatje (1877-1932), The Late Rev. Pambani Jeremiah Mzimba, The Lesser Jabavu Lights, Life of Dr. John Dube, Rev. John Knox Bokwe, Mr. R.V. Selope Thema, Mr. Meschach Pelem, Dr. Walter B. Rubusana --- 'umcir omkhulu' -- Mr. Thomas M. Mapikela -- 'Map of Africa', Mrs. Charlotte M. Maxeke ---, 'Prof' James Thaele, Isaiah Bud-Mbelle --- A Distinguished Civil Servant, Hamilton Masiza: great sportsman, musician, Paul Xiniwe blazed a new trail for Africans, S.E. Krune Mqhayi (Imbongi yeSizwe Jikelele), Rev. Elijah Makiwane, The late S.M. Makgatho .. great teacher-politician, Charles Dube, Rev. Samuel Mazwi, Advocate Alfred Mangena, and Pixley Ka I. Seme. In the prologomenon to the series Matthews writes: 'In this series of articles I propose to deal with the lives and times of African men and women who have played or are playing a significant part in the development of their people. It would of course be impossible to examine even in a limited way all of them or to deal fully with any one of them ... We must place on record for the benefit of our readers, especially the rising generation, something of the rich heritage or endeavour by their forefathers which they might emulate or from which they might draw inspiration. I believe it is difficult if not impossible to inspire people who know of what has gone on before them. Such people are apt to imagine that everything in the world started with them when they were born and will end when they pass out of existence' (June 3, 1961). The second is by Es'kia Mphahlele, where he observes in part: 'Most of the writers discussed up to and including the Dhlomos have sought to reevaluate tradition through their works and strive towards African nationalism. The conflicts they dealt with were a way of comprehending the new world they lived in. Somewhere in their work is a myth, one that has been undergoing a process of erosion because of industrialization, education for the other people's purpose rather than their own, and the political strife, all of which have denied us our history' ('Intellectual Landmarks', *Umhamba Wethu*, [ed.] Mthobeni Mutloatse, Skotaville Publishers, Johannesburg, 1987). Here Mphahlele clearly spells out that the historical project of the New African Movement is concerned with modernity. Compare this with what Pixley Ka Isaka Seme has written in 1905: 'The African people, although not strictly a homogenous race, possess a common fundamental sentiment which is everywhere manifest, crystallizing itself into once common controlling idea. Conflicts and strife are rapidly disappearing before the fusing force of this enlightened perception of the true intertribal relation, which relation should subsist among people with a common destiny. Agencies of a social, economic and religious advance tell of a new spirit which, acting as a leavening ferment, shall raise the anxious and aspiring mass to the level of their ancient glory.' (ibid.). The third instance is Jordan Ngubane, who observes the following in his genealogy of intellectual history: 'The question to which I address myself is: How did the African writer view the problems created for his people by the establishment of the racially closed society? Walter Rubusana is our starting-point because he set in motion a process of self-definition which was to affect the thinking of succeeding generations. Like John Knox Bokwe and later, J.J.R. Jolobe, he trained as a minister of religion. In 1898 he was one of the guiding spirits behind the founding of *Izwi Labantu*, a Xhosa news and views paper which set out to present the African point of view. Rubusana is important for purposes of our discussion because he adopted the view that in a race-conscious society, no group can interpret correctly the mind of the other. No race had the right to prescribe destiny for the others. He couched these principles in language used in his day and presented his thinking in his *History of South Africa from the Native Standpoint* ... Dr. Pixley ka Isaka Seme and his colleagues were the most important spokesmen of African nationalism on the plane of writing, after Rubusana ... Mphahlele, in his writings, spoke for the majority of writers whom the Afrikaner monolith threw into exile. The courage he admired in his people was tested when he began to think of returning to South Africa and fight in the line as some exiles would say. Mphahlele was always the type of man who took his position in the front line, where conflict raged with the fiercest fury ... he returned

Concerning the concept of the New African, which has a fascinating metamorphoses and genealogy within the New African Movement, Mphahlele initiates a revolution in its understanding by encompassing in its inclusion the female principle, whereas previous to him it had only designated the male principle. This idea of the New African was central in constructing South African modernity. It was borrowed from the notion of the New Negro (W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Nellie Fauset, Wallace Thurman and many others) within New Negro modernity by Pixley ka Isaka Seme during his undergraduate days at Columbia University (1902-06) and transplanted it into South African philosophical discourse and into the political sphere of self-identity through the aforementioned great essay. Paradoxically, Seme appropriated this concept from Booker T. Washington (in all probability from the latter's *A New Negro for a New Century* [American Publishing House, 1900], rather than from his close friend Alain Locke, with whom he was at Oxford University) the new Negro as a Rhodes Scholar and the new African jurisprudence), who was to write the most profound philosophical constructs of the idea of the New Negro in his book *The New Negro* (1925). It would be a serious historical mistake to think that Seme was the first African to take cognisance of the importance of the importance of the American Negro experience for the African experience in South Africa, for in fact Tiyo Soga (1829-71), John Tengo Jabavu (1859-1921) and Pambani Jeremiah Mzimba (1850-1911) precede him in articulating this recognition. Tiyo observes: "Africa was of God given the race of Ham. I find the Negro from the days of the old Assyrians downwards, keeping his individuality and distinctness, amid the wrecks of empires, and the revolution of the ages. I find him keeping his place among the nations, and keeping his home and country. I find him opposed by nation after nation and driven from his home. I find him enslaved --- exposed to the vices and the brandy of the white man. I find him in this condition for many a day --- in the West Indian Islands, in Northern and Southern America, and in

not to gloat on the defeat of apartheid on its own territory, but to face the challenge of belonging to territory, but to face the challenge of belonging to Africa and to confront the whites generally and the Afrikaner in particular with that challenge' (in Umhlaba Wethu, *ibid.*). All these three perspectives, from Z.K. Matthews, Ezekiel Mphahlele and Jordan Ngubane,

the South American Colonies of Spain and Portugal. I find him exposed to all these disasters, and yet living --- multiplying and never extinct. Yea, I find him now as the prevalence of christian and philanthropic opinions on the right of man obtains among civilized nations, returning unmanacled to the land of his forefathers, taking back with him the civilization and the christianity of those nations".⁴⁰ John Tengo Jabavu gestures towards the significance of this interconnection by reprint of an article by the white American, General Armstrong, then head of Hampton Institute and the most profound influence on Booker T. Washington (as he extraordinarily portrays in his autobiography *Up From Slavery*), in which he argues that the work ethic, thriftiness, and cleanliness are habits/characteristics essential to any people wishing to join and enter a new age.⁴¹ Pamdani Jeremiah Mzimba draws the strange lesson from the failure of American Reconstruction that black people should disengage themselves politically in circumstances of white domination: "But a lesson was taught the coloured people that is invaluable. Let them rejoice that they are out of politics. Let the white men rule. .. The remarks made about the negroes in America are very much applicable to the South African in Africa to let politics alone at present. Let us be content to be ruled by the colonist. Let us only have to do with politics in order to encourage those white men who desire to give us schools and books."⁴² Pixley Ka Isaka Seme was building on this venerable lineage in his intellectual importation and transformation of the concept of the New Negro into the idea of the New African.

Although Pixley ka Isaka Seme launched the initiatory processes of transforming the imaginary historical consciousness of the 'Old African' bound to tradition to the 'New African' aligned with modernity, it was R. V. Selope

clearly indicate that there were similarities in approach towards modernity among the New African intellectuals which constituted the *unity* of the New African Movement.

⁴⁰ Tiyo Soga, 'What Is The Destiny of the Kaffir Race?', *King William's Town Gazette and Kaffrarian Banner*, May 11, 1865.

⁴¹ General S.C. Armstrong, 'Elevating the Negro', *Imvo Zabantsundu*, August 6, 1891. John Tengo Jabavu was founder and editor of the newspaper.

⁴² Pamdani Jeremiah Mzimba, 'Education Among The Natives', *Imvo Zabantsundu*, December 30, 1886. Ostensibly Mzimba was drawing this historical lesson from George Washington's *History of the Negro in America*, 2629-2880 (1883). Elijah Makiwane, among others, dissented from such a reading of the African American historian. Crucial in our context, is that it is the New Negro book that initiates the first serious intellectual debate

Thema who constructed the complex structures of the possible actual historical consciousness of the New African. Selope Thema effected this revolutionary transformation in a series of brilliant essays on the pages of *Umteteli wa Bantu* in the 1920s. Without a shadow of a doubt *Umteteli wa Bantu* in this extraordinary decade (too many of us are too intoxicated with the 1950s which blinds us to the 'Jazz Age', even in South Africa, of the 1920s) mapped the historic forms of the consciousness of the new African in the making. Though R.V. Selope Thema was in the lead, there were other New African intellectuals working beside him in the newspaper: H. Selby Msimang, Mark S. Radebe, Allan Kirkland Soga and Isaac Bud-M'Belle and Solomon T. Plaatje in their last seasons, and, and H. I. E. Dhlomo in his first intellectual season. Selope Thema dramatically changed forever South African intellectual history in this decade. So much so, that we can gauge this achievement from the reaction of three outstanding New African intellectuals: Solomon T. Plaatje ruefully laments that the first blooming years of the newspaper coincided with his being in New York where he was engaged with New Negro intellectuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Philip Randolph and others --- the implication being that he would have wanted to have been present from the beginning stages of such a momentous intellectual occasion; H. I. E. Dhlomo twenty years later, as one of the editors of *Ilanga lase Natal* with his brother R. R. R. Dhlomo, extends Selope Thema's articulations of the New African in the direction of W. E. B. Du Bois by initiating the idea of the New African Talented Tenth (Dhlomo combines this notion with his deep fascination for Thomas Carlyle's⁴³ notion of history being made only by heroic figures); Jordan Ngubane as editor of *Inkundla ya Bantu* in the late 1940s postulates that R. V. Selope Thema in the decade of the 1920s was arguably the greatest New African intellectual but that unfortunately and tragically his last twenty years as editor of *Bantu World* (beginning in 1932) have been puerile and intellectually barren.⁴³ A mere

among Africans who are in the process of constructing African modernities. It is the ideology of African Nationalism that made possible the making of 'black' modernities.

⁴³ In the aforementioned essays on the New African Movement we undertake a detailed analysis of all these issues. It goes without saying that there was no unity of appreciation in understanding the historical meaning of modernity in South Africa: for instance, whereas H.I.E. Dhlomo was a wild enthusiast for this new historical experience, however much he was appreciated by what he considered to be the Shakan revolution in African traditional societies,

glance at one or two essays of Selope Thema quickly reveals the merit of Plaatje's, Dhlomo's, Ngubane's, assessments.

Without as yet having visited United States, which he was to do I approximately two decades later, R. V. Selope Thema seemed to have had a profounder understanding intellectually than say Pixley or Plaatje or John Dube (all three of whom had already visited this country) as to the possible historical forms by which New African modernity can appropriate New Negro modernity.⁴⁴ Contextualizing New Negro modernity States modernity itself, Selope Thema makes the following observations: the economic development of the United States in the nineteenth-century is one of the wonders of modernity; this enabled the construction of great cities with their spectacular skyscrapers which have been the envy and admiration of Europe; the wealth of the country came from a cosmopolitan population; the presence of a common language (English) for a profoundly diverse and complex population has given a unity of purpose and action to the country; for Selope Thema the greatest wonder of wonders is the progress achieved by African Americans within American modernity just barely fifty years from their emancipation; he attributes this advancement and progress of black Americans to the ownership of land, colleges, newspapers and Universities; he also marvels at African American organizations such as schools, churches and social services; and lastly Selope Thema postulates that the reason for African American progress is because of the combination of religion (read Christianity), education (read Western Civilization), and good living (read

Solomon T. Plaatje had the most deepest reservations, troubled by what he evaluated as the erosion of African moral ethics, faith and trust in things African, unleashed by the deluge of modernity. This was the principal reason he rejected the offer of the presidency of the ANC in 1917 (then the South African Native National Congress), which was accepted by Sefako Mapogo Makgatho until 1924 (Nelson Mandela in *Long Walk to Freedom* [1995] is full of praises for his predecessor).

⁴⁴Such a statement is very contentious, if nothing else because by founding Ohlange Institute in 1901 and launching the *Ilanga lase Natal* newspaper in 1903 (both founding acts indebted to the exemplary figure of Booker T. Washington), it could be argued that John Langibalele Dube made possible the Zulu intellectual renaissance of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s (Gosiah Mapumulo, Benedict Vilakazi, H. I. E. Dhlomo, Rueben Caluza, Jordan K. Ngubane, A. W. G. Champion, Anton Lembede, Albert Luthuli, R. R. R. Dhlomo, E. H. A. Made and others). On an intellectual plane, John Dube, much earlier than R. V. Selope Thema, showed a serious acquaintance with New Negro modernity: *A Talk Upon My Native Land* (Rochester, 1892) and "Are Negroes Better Off In Africa? Conditions and Opportunities of Negroes in America and Africa Compared" (*The Missionary Review of the World*, August 1904, pp.583-6).

modernization).⁴⁵ What truly intrigued R. V. Selope Thema was the acceleration at such short duration of the entrance of African Americans into modernity. What constantly preoccupied him in this decade was whether the New Africans could replicate such an astonishing achievement in South Africa: if the New Negroes, the children and grand-children of former slaves could achieve this astounding realization, what could be the reason(s) preventing New Africans, children and grand-children of non-slaves (yes, we were descendants of 'heathens', or for that matter actual heathens, but still not slaves) from attaining similar realizations. Of course this was the fundamental sub-text of the whole New African Movement (from Harold Cressy to Richard Rive), with which all the New African intellectuals were engaged with. Ezekiel Mphahlele, at the simultaneous moment as Peter Abrahams, gave a unique twist to this historical search or historical acquisition as will be evident in a moment.

What astonished R. V. Selope Thema even more so is that within a short period of their entrance into modernity, African Americans were already at its avant-garde in the arts by inventing jazz and the charleston dance, two quintessential expressions of modernism.⁴⁶ Within a short duration of acquiring modernity, black Americans had created a musical modernism which was universally embraced by the whole world. The unstated question for Selope Thema naturally was the matter of the possible capability of the New Africans in matching such an attainment. Despite oppression, racism, and inferiorization African Americans were subjected to, they had created Negro art forms which the white Western civilization just could not but passionately embrace as the high achievements of human civilization. Selope Thema argues that in actual fact the Charleston was an authentic African dance which enabled Africans in slavery to survive some of its traumas. The

⁴⁵ R.V. Selope Thema, "Negro Progress in America", *Umteteli wa Bantu*, December 22, 1923.

⁴⁶ R. V. Selope Thema, "The Message of the Charleston", *Umteteli wa Bantu*, December 13, 1923.

experience of United States had only added few embellishments to it. As a gift from the 'jungle' to the 'civilized world', and as possessing rhythmic

harmonies, it bespoke against racism and prejudice. After mentioning jazz, R. V. Selope Thema completely ignores it thereafter in the rest of the essay, in synchrony with the prejudice of other New African intellectuals against this great art form.

It was because of these great modernistic attainments of the New Negroes that R. V. Selope Thema began theorizing the constructs of New African and New Africa. Whereas for Pixley ka Isaka Seme the idea of the New African was a political and philosophical notion, for Selope Thema what was crucial were the actual historical attainments giving coherence, logic and justification to the categorization itself. In the essay "The New Africa", Selope Thema theorizes that a New Africa is in the process of being forged by the process of transformation from the paganism, the darkness and heathenism of the Old

Times to the modern settlements and civilization of New Times.¹ The new technologies of communication such as telegraph, telephone, wireless were enabling African people to overcome the formidable geographic obstacles such as the great Sahara desert or the ethnic barriers in the form of tribalism. For Selope Thema a true indication of the march of the African people towards modernity was their conversion to Christianity: hence for him Ethiopianism (the independent African church movement) was a serious threat to this quest for modernity.² In his estimation, in contradistinction to Ethiopianism, the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) was a historic force bringing modernity and the unity of the African people into being. He praised young Africans as embodying the historical vision of a New Africa.

¹R. V. Selope Thema, "The New Africa", *Umteteli wa Bantu*, October 29, 1927. Perhaps of all New African intellectuals, Selope Thema had an absolutely irrational hatred for traditional African societies. Note the title of his autobiographical essay "Up From Barbarism", in emulation of his master's *Up From Slavery*. Also note the title of his unpublished, even perhaps unpublishable, autobiography of 1936: *Out of Darkness: From Cattle-Herding to the Editor's Chair*: in other words, from heathenism to civilization. Despite his obsessions for Manichean categorizations and binarism, Selope Thema had a formidable intellect.

²It is wonderfully ironic that this rabid African nationalist, who broke away from the ANC in the early 1950s because he believed that the organization had fallen under undue influence of Europeans and Communists, or European Communists (take your pick), could not fathom in the 1920s that Ethiopianism was an expression of African modernities in search of their Africanness in rebellion against the hegemony of contemporary Christianity, the representation of European modernities. These matters as well as his ferocious but tiresome anti-Communism will have to be considered elsewhere.

The Old Africa was shrouded in isolation and the New Africa was moving towards the enlightenment of Western civilization. It was the historic role of the New African to bring about the realization of a New Africa.

It was in this context that R. V. Selope Thema wrote the essay "The New African".³ He opens his thesis in this document by arguing that because Africans have been backward, uneducated and supposedly pagans, they are easily vulnerable to European oppression and exploitation. Like Jews, they have been kept in positions of servitude. Despite this, Selope Thema continues, Africans are determined to play a fundamental role in the civilization of Africa by acquiring the necessary knowledge and the wherewithal to undertake such a monumental task. Placing the acquisition and production of knowledge at the center of the transformation of the Old African into the New African and at the making of South African modernity, Selope Thema points out that sending young Africans to go to study at overseas universities is not sufficient, in that in the long run such institutions must be built by Africans themselves as part of the process of instilling the spirit of self-help and self-reliance. For him racism and segregation cannot be an excuse on the part of the New Africans from appropriating the intellectual and spiritual heritage of mankind by producing first rate scientists, writers and artists. R. V. Selope Thema singles out the young Z. K. Matthews, who had a few years earlier been the first graduate of Fort Hare University, as embodying the exemplary attitude of the New African. The New African should undertake two tasks: a study of the past histories of the countries that are playing the leading position in the civilizational culture of modernity; and critically examine the cultural records of these nations, with the aim of absorbing the philosophies of Plato, Darwin and others, as well as the writings of Homer, Dante, Goethe and Shakespeare. Thema hoped that the New African would exemplify the quality of mind that would be on the same level as the great minds of Europe, Asia and of the Americas. He was absolutely certain that a New African was in the process of emerging possessing the characteristics of rigour, vitality, determination and vigour.

³ R. V. Selope Thema, "The New African", *Umteteli wa Bantu*, July 21, 1928.

By the time R. V. Selope Thema was writing these two brilliant and historic essays (among many others), Pixley ka Isaka Seme had already been constructing intellectual and political portraits of New Africans embodying this philosophy of New Africanism as articulated by Thema himself. Nearly or over a hundred of them were written over the 50-year span or duration of the New African Movement beginning with Pixley Seme ("Biographical Sketch: Rev. W. B. Rubusana, Ph. D., M. P. C.", *Imvo Zabantsundu*, January 24, 1911) and ending with Lewis Nkosi ("Robert Sobukwe: An Assessment", *Africa Report*, April 1962). It needs to be pointed out that Seme was not the originator of the generic form of the New African portrait in South Africa, but rather, it was F. Z. S. Peregrino, the ^{Ghanian} Chanian who resided in our country for approximately two decades (1900-19). Having lived in United States for a decade just before coming to Cape Town, Peregrino seems to have embodied in his person the extraordinary blending of New Negroism and New Africanism (this could also be said of his compatriot Dr. James Emman Kwegyir Aggrey who two decades later had a remarkable effect on New Africanism in South Africa).⁴ It was Peregrino who brought and transplanted the ideology and philosophy Pan-Africanism in South Africa. While in Cape Town he launched the newspaper *South African Spectator* (December 1, 1900 to October 1903). It was in his newspaper he wrote what would seem to be the first New African portrait ("The Father of the Church: A Popular Native Minister", *South African Spectator*, September 7, 1901). This portrait of Mangane Maake Mokone, the founder of Ethiopianism in 1892, is of historic importance because Ethiopianism was an intellectual and political search for the authentic forms of African modernities. What gives this portrait an added importance is that while most of South African New Africans such as John L. Dube were hostile to Ethiopianism, this Ghanian New African was able to recognize instantly its historic importance. In other words, each of the New African portraits was in a way a philosophizing on the practicalities of constructing New African modernity in South Africa.

⁴ See the two obituaries by R. V. Selope Thema and Solomon T. Platje on the death of 'Aggrey of Africa': *Umteteli wa Bantu*, September 17, 1927.

Here is a very partial listing of these portraits by major figures of the New African Movement themselves:⁵ (Solomon T. Plaatje [or] Pixley ka Isaka Seme, "The New Solicitor: Mr. R. W. Msimang", *Tsala ea Batho*, July 15, 1913; H. I. E. Dhlomo, "Dr. B. W. Vilakazi: Poet", *Ilanga lase Natal*, March 30, 1946; "Dr. J. L. Dube, Ph. D., M. R. C., As Author", *Ilanga lase Natal*, August 19, 1944; "Dr. J. L. Dube, Ph. D., M. R. C.: A Tribute", *Ilanga lase Natal*, February 23, 1946; "Three Famous African Journalists I Knew: R. R. R. Dhlomo", *Inkundla ya Bantu*, August Second Fortnight, 1946; W. M. Tsotsi, "Davidson Tengo Jabavu", *Inkundla ya Bantu*, June 1941; Jordan K. Ngubane, "Three Famous African Journalists I Knew: III, Richard Victor Selope Thema", *Inkundla ya Bantu*, July Second Fortnight, 1946; "John Langalibalele Dube: A Tribute", *Inkundla ya Bantu*, February, First Fortnight, 1946; "Dr. P. ka I. Seme: A Tribute", *Inkundla ya Bantu*, June 30, 1951; "Prof. Z. K. Matthews", *African Viewpoint Indian Opinion*, June 26, 1953; "Albert Luthuli: President of the Congress", *Masterpiece in Bronze Drum*, February 1953; A. P. Mda, "Jordan Ngubane", *Masterpiece in Bronze, Drum*, May 1954; "The Late A. M. Lembede, M. A. (Phil.), LL. B.", *Ilanga lase Natal*, September 27, 1947; Henry Nxumalo, "Prof. Z. K. Matthews", *Masterpiece in Bronze, Drum*, August 1952; "The Most Controversial Man in Black Politics: Richard Victor Selope Thema", *Masterpiece in Bronze, Drum*, March 1953; "Return of [Peter] Abrahams", *Drum*, July 1953; Arthur Maimane, "The Late Clements Kadalie", *Masterpiece in Bronze Drum*, June 1952; Can Themba, "Henry Nxumalo", *Masterpiece in Bronze Drum*, February 1957; "Zeke [Mphahlele] Past Bachelor of Arts", *Drum*, September 1957). This selected listing of New African intellectual and political portraits from Richard W. Msimang to Ezekiel Mphahlele articulates the complex contours of the New African Movement.

Ezekiel Mphahlele's New African portraits achieve two innovations concerning their cultural geography: they cut across gender lines as well as the geographic lines of the (black) Atlantic. With the exception of Alfred B. Xuma's short monograph on Charlotte Manye Maxeke with a Preface by W. E. B. Du

⁵In the already mentioned "A Self-Portrait Of New African Intellectuals in Modernity: The New African Movement From *Imvo Zabantsundu* Newspaper (1880s) To *Drum* Magazine (1950s)",

Bois, Mphahlele was among the first, if not the first, of his historical moment to write portraits of New African women.⁶ In the 1930s H. I. E. Dhlomo had emphasized the importance womanhood in the making of South African modernity. In the essay "Bantu Womanhood", he remarked: "A few decades ago woman's position was unenviable. She was not allowed to hold office or even to participate in ecclesiastical, political and civic institutions; she was expected to observe a special code of morality and was denied many of the privileges enjoyed by men. Today woman has arisen from a position of subordination, inferiority and obscurity, to a place of prominence, independence, power and respect... Our women must be taught their true value and the great contribution which they can and must make to society. They should know that though physiologically, emotionally and, perhaps, psychologically different to man, they are none the less man's equal. . . Let us liberate our women folk from the thralldom and tyranny of custom, ignorance, subjection and the inferiority complex, and our progress will be accelerated."⁷ A few years earlier, Charlotte Manye Maxeke had written the following concerning the formation of a New African womanhood in modernity: "In their primitive state South African Natives still regard their womenfolks as did their ancestors as valuable assets for personal profit, because from time immemorial every female child had a fixed price in cattle under the custom of dowry institutions at marriageable age. . . In the modern times a new type of Native womanhood hampered and different in many respects from their mothers especially in virtues and piety unquestionably being the product of the present European civilisation in the sub-continent has consequently arisen."⁸ From both these reflections of H. I. E. Dhlomo and Charlotte Manye Maxeke, it is apparent that the New African intellectuals had no illusions that without the progress of New African womanhood the modernity of the New

we attempt to encompass this unique phenomenon of theorizing the making of South African modernity through the writing of New African intellectual and political portraits.

⁶ Alfred B. Xuma, *Charlotte Manye (Maxeke) Or What An Educated African Girl Can Do*, Society of the A. M. E. Church, Johannesburg, 1930. Writing at the same time as Ezekiel Mphahlele, Can Themba drew one of the most elaborate portraits of a New African woman: "Dolly Rathebe", *Drum*, January, February, March, April, May 1957.

⁷ H. I. E. Dhlomo, "Bantu Womanhood", *Umteteli wa Bantu*, May 10, 1930.

⁸ Charlotte Manye Maxeke, "The Progress of Native Womanhood in South Africa", in *Christianity and the Natives of South Africa*, (ed.) J. Dexter Taylor, The Lovedale Institution Press, 1929.

African Movement would be unrealizable. Even John Tengo Jabavu, who was in many ways reactionary and retrogressive on many political issues, was progressive on the matter of New African womanhood: it was he who passionately opposed the missionaries for refusal of co-education thus ensuring that Fort Hare University would be open to both the New African men and the New African women from the moment of its founding in 1916. So then, in a sense, Ezekiel Mphahlele's innovativeness on this matter was within a pre-established lineage.

Similar to the reflections of Charlotte Manye Maxeke and H. I. E. Dhlomo, Ezekiel Mphahlele remarks that the historical experience of modernity has transformed the role of women in society: 'Yes, a number of African women have achieved great things in their time. Some are well known, others are unsung heroines who work silently like ants, and all that people is a job well done. They are all the more remarkable when we consider that 20 years ago Africans regarded it a waste of time and money to send a daughter to high school and sheer madness to let her go to university. They are the product of a new era.⁹ Here Mphahlele achieves something unique. Whereas the New African portraits were invariably of the male gender and unfailingly of particular individuals Mphahlele in this snapshot achieves a collective portrait of the female gender. He names women who have distinguished themselves in four professions: nurses, teachers, social workers, doctors: respectively, Mary Molepo, Rachael Nkosi, Elizabeth Nhlapo, Mina Soga, Phyllis Mzaidume; Mildred Malie, Eunice Denalane, Caroline Khaketla, Evelyn Lebona; Edith Hlatshwayo, Mabel Ngakane, Gelana Twala, Victoria Mahamba Sithole; Drs. Mary Malahlela, Margaret Chuene, Caroline Nomopozolo, Nomoto Bikitsha. He concludes with this observation: "There are thousands of others who are achieving great things in various fields of human endeavour. After working unobtrusively and without commendation, they are influencing our national life toward progress and betterment." There is no doubt that Mphahlele's historical awareness of the importance of women in facilitating the progression of the African people towards modernity was imprinted on his

⁹Ezekiel Mphahlele, "Salute to African Women", *Golden City Post*, April 17, 1955, my emphasis.

imagination by the collective mass action of women in the Defiance Campaign, in opposition to apartheid and the pass laws, and in resisting the Sophiatown removals. It was in this decade of the 1950s that for the first time African women played an active role collectively in transforming South African history. It was these political manifestations by women that compelled a new rewriting of New African portraits of intellectuals and political leaders in modernity by Mphahlele. It is not accidental that the only New African portrait of a particular individual woman Mphahlele wrote was that of Lilian Ngoyi, who was at the center of all these political activities and thereby continuing on the legacy established by Charlotte Mary Maxeke.¹⁰ It needs to be remarked that none of the autobiographies of the *Drum* writers seem to evince any awareness of the political manifestations of their historical moment: neither Bloke Modisane's *Blame Me On History* (1963) nor Ezekiel Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* (1959) nor Alfred Hutchinson's *Road to Ghana* (1960) nor Todd Matshikiza's *Chocolate For My Wife* (1961). It is only in the recently written autobiographies by the last generation of New African women that we get the complex picture of the political context of South African modernity in the 1950s: Maggie Resha's *Mangoana Tsoara Thipa ka Bohaleng (My Life in the Struggle)*, 1991), Helen Joseph's *Side by Side: An Autobiography* (1986), and Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call Me Woman* (1986).

Reflecting the fact that in all probability the concept the idea of the New African intellectual and political portrait had been appropriated from the photo-gallery of New Negro intellectuals and politicians (men and women) in Booker T. Washington's *A New Negro For A New Century*, by a sheer stroke of brilliance Mphahlele, a New African intellectual, ends this generic form of South African modernity, by writing an intellectual portrait of a New Negro intellectual, the poet Langston Hughes. It is as though an idea that had run its course, at the last moments of the New African Movement, is returned to where it came from by making it reflect on its origins. The choice of Hughes was fortuitous because as a young man of 18 years he had stood on the shores of Dakar, in Senegal announced himself as the poet of the African

¹⁰ Ezekiel Mphahlele, "Lilian Ngoyi", the source has since been misplaced.

people by writing the famous poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." Also by the time Mphahlele wrote "Langston Hughes", the great American poet was already aware of the Sophiatown Renaissance phenomenon.¹¹ So much so, that in the early 1950s he exchanged a voluminous correspondence with some of its members: Richard Rive, Bloke Modisane, Ezekiel Mphahlele and the non-member Peter Abrahams. Placing him within the context of Harlem Renaissance, the high point of New Negro literary modernism, Mphahlele marvels at his versatility as a writer: poetry, fiction, plays, jazz lyrics, librettos, books about jazz and on African American history. Concentrating on his poetry, Mphahlele is impressed by the distinct cultural identity of the African Americans it trumpets within the hegemony of European-American culture: this cultural identity can only be attained by identifying with Africa. He remarks on the lyricism and musicality of the poetry. Mphahlele concludes by contrasting Langston Hughes' identification with the struggle of the young African intellectuals in creating of African modernities to Richard Wright's perplexity that modernity had failed in Africa. Peter Abrahams' *Return to Egoli* (1953) shows himself in more empathy with Wright's quest to understand the dialectic between tradition and modernity in African history.¹² Within a year of writing the portrait of Langston Hughes, Ezekiel Mphahlele was to invite him to participate in the historic 1962 Kampala Conference of African Writers of English Expression, where the great American poet met the following young African writers in the making: Nigerians --- Chinua Achebe, John Pepper Clark, Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, and Donatus Nwoga; South Africans --- Ezekiel Mphahlele, Bloke Modisane, Arthur J. Maimane; Ghanians --- Kofi Awoonor and Cameron Duodo; Kenyans --- Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Rebecca Njau, and Grace Ogot; the Ugandan --- John Nagenda.¹³

¹¹Ezekiel Mphahlele, "Langston Hughes", *Black Orpheus*, no. 9, June 1961; subsequently with slight modifications it reprinted in *Fighting Talk* as "Negro Poet: Trumpet At His Lips" (December 1961/ January 1962).

¹² Peter Abrahams seems to have been profoundly fascinated by Richard Wright's grappling with the seemingly triumph of tradition over modernity in African history, for he returns to the issue a few years later: "The Blacks", in *The World of Mankind*, (ed.) Ted Patrick, Golden Press, New York, 1962.

¹³ Bernard Fonlon, "Report on the Kampala Conference", *Presence Africaine*, vol. 17, First Quarterly 1963. A very lucid and brilliant essay: a very historic document of a very historic event.

By the time Ezekiel Mphahlele wrote the portrait of Langston Hughes, of one of the last surviving of New Negro modernity, he was already in exile, having left South Africa for Nigeria in 1957. It is in this context that we should mention the second monumental historical project of the New African Movement: the construction of South African modernity. The coupling of the names of Peter Abrahams and Ezekiel Mphahlele is not merely a matter of happenstance, for it is they who contributed to the construction of South African modernity by forging a New African literary modernism by appropriating the poetics of New Negro literary modernism. Their predecessors within the New African Movement were more preoccupied with appropriating a philosophy of life in modernity (a religious philosophy, a philosophy of history, a philosophy of pedagogics) and a politics of lived existence (the politics of black identity, the politics of representation, political representation, the politics of accommodation and resistance) than appropriating the principles of aesthetic representation. The coupling of names of the earlier generations of intellectuals and political leaders of New African modernity and those of the New Negro modernity makes clear the historical nature of the borrowing: Pambani Jeremiah Mzimba/George Washington Williams, Mangane Maake Mokone/Henry M. Turner, John Langalibalele Dube/Booker T. Washington, Pixley ka Isaka Seme/Alain Locke, Clements Kadalie/A. Philip Randolph, James Thaele/Marcus Garvey, W. E. B. Du Bois/H. I. E. Dhlomo, R. V. Selope Thema/James Weldon Johnson, and so on. There are several reasons why this influence (of New Negro modernity on New African modernity) at this time could not be ^eaffected on an aesthetic plane. First, the founding texts of African American written literary culture were slave narratives which did not have the historical immediacy and resonance in the lived experience of New Africans. Secondly, these earlier generations of New African intellectuals and politicians were still largely shaped in their cultural formation by the rural environment, even traditional societies, much more than the modernity of the urban centers, which they wholeheartedly embraced later. Thirdly, vernacular languages were still the fundamental shaping influences rather the European languages, as would be the case with the generation to which Ezekiel Mphahlele and Peter Abrahams belonged. Fourthly, given that the generation of Thomas Mofolo and Solomon T. Plaatje were still seeking a historical explanation for

the defeat of African traditional societies by European modernities, it is not surprising that the genre of the historical novel would predominate in their literary practice, a form which was practically foreign in the African American literary space (*The Pilgrim's Progress* and Walter Scott had more relevance). Fifthly, given that these generations of New Africans came predominantly from missionary schools, their ethos would be more Victorian, even Romantic in formation, rather than modernistic. Lastly, to these New Africans the Harlem Renaissance was not a living event, even to H. I. E. Dhlomo and Benedict Vilakazi, who were profoundly drawn to its poets, particularly to Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes. Given these factors, it is not surprising that the generations of New Africans from Charlotte Manye Maxeke to Harold Cressy were drawn to the philosophy, politics and philosophy of New Negro modernity, than to its aesthetic forms of representation (perhaps Negro Spirituals but definitely not jazz).¹⁴ A complex differential history of the New African Movement still needs to be constructed.

To Peter Abrahams and Ezekiel Mphahlele the Harlem Renaissance was at the center of their engagement with New Negro literary modernism. The celebrated pages of Abrahams' autobiography *Tell Freedom* mentions three important texts as having been fundamental in altering and transforming his historical and cultural consciousness forever in the mid 1930s: Alain Locke's anthology *The New Negro*, W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, and the voice of Paul Robeson. In a Letter of January 14, 1954 written from Essex (England) to Langston Hughes in New York, Peter Abrahams again recalls this momentous occasion of encounter: "I was very happy indeed to get your letter of the 9th because I have been an admirer of yours for so long. I still recall most vividly the emotions, as a semi-literate youngster in Johannesburg, I first came across your work many years ago in Alain Locke's *New Negro* anthology. That discovery made all the difference in the world to my life because till then literature, like so much else, had seemed to me to be 'Reserved for Europeans only' --- the sign with which I grew up. I have recorded the impact of that discovery on me in my new book, *Tell Freedom*,

¹⁴ We grappled with these factors and processes in the/forementioned essays on the New African Movement.

which Knopf are bringing out in America this year. In fact, I expect my agent will be contacting you to ask permission for a short poem of yours I quote. So you will see that it is I who should thank you, and not you me. Please tell your fellow American Negroes through your newspaper column how tremendously important their achievements are to Africans. They are a unique source of inspiration."¹⁵ In his many writings Mphahlele concurs with this high estimation of the influence of New Negro modernity on New African modernity. Mphahlele also in his first and classic autobiography (*Down Second Avenue*) recalls this moment when they were students at St. Peter's Secondary School in Rosettenville (Johannesburg): "The other Coloured friend was Peter Abrahams, now a writer of note. I remember him vividly talking about Marcus Garvey, taking it for granted we must know about him. And dreamily he said what a wonderful thing it would be if all the negroes in the world came back to Africa... I had a vague feeling that his opinion of Marus Garvey typified him as someone who was always yearning for far-away places. He used to tell us that he wanted to show the white man that he was equal to him."¹⁶ Both Abrahams and Mphahlele appropriated New Negro literary modernism through the writings of Richard Wright. In both their first published writings which were collection of short stories, Abrahams' *Dark Testament* (1942) and Mphahlele's *Man Must Live and Other Stories* (1947), the imprint of Richard Wright's collection of short stories *Uncle Tom's Children* (1936) is evident. But it needs to be emphasized, as his second autobiography *Afrika My Music: An Autobiography 1957-1983* makes clear, the discovery of Richard Wright was in the context of earlier literary discoveries: Cervantes, Dickens, Gorky, Dostoevsky, Gogol and Chekhov. In consequence, the American writer was not the only figure who initiated Mphahlele to literary modernism as a worldly experience. In other words, the realism of Richard Wright was learned in the context of other learnings, those of Hemingway and Faulkner, for instance.

Nonetheless, the realism of Wright was more determinant and fundamental in shaping the literary imagination of Ezekiel Mphahlele than the differential

¹⁵ From the Hughes Papers at the Beinecke Library, Yale University. ²⁸ Ezekiel Mphahlele, *Down Second Avenue*, Faber and Faber, London, 1959, p. 128-9.

realism(s) of Europerans and European-Americans, the proof being the fact that he has always oriented himself as a life-long preoccupation towards New Negro literary modernism than to European literary modernism, however formative the latter had been. In one of his autobiographical essays he provides the reason for this: "By accident I discovered the Afro-Americans. Fanny Klenerman, the grande dame of Vanguard Booksellers in Johannesburg, had titles by Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes. Wright's volume of short stories, *Uncle Tom's Children* contained the kind of violence and brutal truths about white racism that struck a common chord in me, even as they tore me up inside. I also discovered Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*. I discovered English translations of Flaubert, Boccaccio, Rabelais. Hemingway and Wright taught me economy of language and the impressionistic concreteness of image, Faulkner taught me resonance, the Russians the totality of craftsmanship."¹⁷ Clearly then, neither Faulkner nor Hemingway nor the Russian masters could teach him what Richard Wright was eminently capable of doing: his historical situatedness as a black person in modernity in the twentieth-century. It is this that drew Mphahlele to New Negro literary modernity as well as to its later manifestations and metamorphoses among African Americans: for instance, the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s.

Although Mphahlele has written some memorable short stories employing the realism of Richard Wright, witness for instance the classic short story "Mrs. Plum", and has also written some estimable novels such as *The Wanderers* (1971) and *Chirundu* (1979), it would seem to this observer that posterity will

¹⁶ Es'kia Mphahlele, *Africa My Music: An Autobiography 1957-1983*, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1984, p. 16.

¹⁷ Es'kia Mphahlele, "My Experience as a Writer", in *Momentum: On recent South African Writing*, (eds.) M. J. Daymond, J. U. Jacobs, Margaret Lenta, University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1984, p. 78. In *Africa My Music*, he also mentions his fondness for Langston Hughes' collection of short stories *The Ways of White Folks*: "Although he did not have the driving diction that was Wright's trademark, in their own gentle and almost unobtrusive manner Langston's short fiction and poetry did things to me. I realised later that I had needed them both — those two antithetical idioms of black American expression, Wright's and Langston's." (p. 19). It is perhaps important to recall here that it was in Langston Hughes' anthology *An African Treasury* (1960) that for the first time the writings of the Sophiatown Renaissance writers were presented to the world: Ezekiel Mphahlele, Bloke Modisane, Todd Matshikiza and Can Themba; and also Isaac Wauchope, Phyllis Ntantala, Peter Abrahams, Peter Kumalo and Tennyson Makiwane.

always remember him for his critical imagination rather than his creative imagination within the history of the New African Movement. It is as a critic and as a scholar that Ezekiel Mphahlele has brought New Negro modernity and New African modernity in closer historical proximation to each other and thereby contributing immensely to the construction of South African modernity. It was perhaps because he is a member of the last intellectual generation of the New African Movement that Mphahlele wrote three major studies of African American literary modernity in two books and in a major essay: *The African Image* (1962, and new edition in 1974), *Voices in the Whirlwind and Other Essays* (1972), and in Chinua Achebe's journal *Okike* (1973-6). Although the latter two texts were written in exile, they were still informed by the historical logic and the historical necessity of the New African Movement which had been terminated and 'defeated' more than a decade earlier, in 1960. As we shall see in a moment, when he fully understood the serious implications of the defeat or exhaustion of the New African Movement in the early stages of his 20-year exile period, Mphahlele initiated a revolution in South African cultural history: a radical shift from a discourse between New African modernity and New Negro modernity (South Africa and United States) under the auspices of the cultural politics of modernity to a discourse between modern South African national literature and modern African national literatures (South Africa in Africa), especially the extraordinary dialogue between Nigerian and South African literatures, under the guidance of the politics of decolonization.¹⁸ This is one of the reasons at the outset of the essay we remarked that Mphahlele demarcates endings and beginnings of

¹⁸ It is ironic and very fascinating that Langston Hughes in his anthology *An African Treasury* published Mphahlele's essay "Accra Conference Diary" that could be taken to pronounce in an indirect way an 'epistemological break' between New Negro modernity and New African modernity. It is not surprising that Frantz Fanon occupies center stage in the essay, since from this moment the politics of decolonization ('decolonizing the mind' as Ngugi would later amplify) in the cultural sphere predominate in the critical imagination of Ezekiel Mphahlele. The essay was a report on The All-African People's Conference, Accra, Ghana, December 8, 1958. The importance of this Conference in African political history in the twentieth-century cannot possibly be overestimated. Another major New African intellectual of the New African Movement was present at the same Conference: Jordan Kush Ngubane. Also in his assessment of this major event, Ngubane also posits Frantz Fanon as its great presenter and great intellect: "Accra Conference---I, II, III, IV, V, VI", *Indian Opinion*, January 9, 16, 23, 30, February 6, 20, 1959. Both Mphahlele and Ngubane by implication indicate that the Conference was the great moment in the theorization and articulation of African Nationalism. It is for this reason that we have placed Mphahlele's re-situating South Africa in

South African intellectual and cultural history at particular moments. But it is necessary to return to the three texts just mentioned. Two essays written in the mid-1950s give historical contextualization to these three texts which were the last consideration of the significance and meaning of New Negro modernity for New African modernity before the final denouement.

In the first of these contextualizing essays, "Thoughts on Literature among Africans", Mphahlele canvases the literatures he holds in high esteem, Victorian (Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, Thomas Carlyle, George Meredith, Thomas Hardy, George Eliot), Russian (Fyodor Dostoevsky, Alexander Pushkin, Anton Chekhov, Maxim Gorky, Leo Tolstoy) and modern English (D. H. Lawrence, E. M. Forster), to see what historical issues of creativity they could possibly impart to South African literature in the process of fully engaging itself with the historical experience of modernity.¹⁹ In other words, how can these European literatures illuminate our major exponents such as Thomas Mofolo, Benedict Vilakazi, Solomon T. Plaatje, S. E. K. Mqhayi, J. J. R. Jolobe? Perhaps because it was written for a Marxist publication, the tone of the essay has a quality which is not encountered often in Mphahlele's writings. Attempting to gauge the nature of popular taste in literature and the cultural geography of readership, he formulates certain ruling or regulating ideas observed in the aforementioned literatures: literary standards shift due to popular taste; modes of life determine what we read; politics and economics determine what people read; Victorian literature deeply affected by the industrial revolution; a writer cannot live outside his age; writers of the same age interested in different aspects of life --- for instance, Dickens focuses on the poor, Thackeray on Victorian snobbery, and Thomas Hardy reveals a fatalistic scepticism; a true artist gives expression to the best he is looking forward to; the Russian writers were dissatisfied with the pattern of Czarist oppression; and certain writers are discontent with the ruling class ideas. Shifting to South Africa and examining the vernacular writings of Mqhayi, Mofolo, Plaatje and Vilakazi, Mphahlele makes the Marxian critique

Africa under the ideology of African Nationalism, his unique articulation of the last monumental historical project of the New African Movement.

that the poetry of these writers' historical romances does not concern itself with the social evils and justices of the white ruling order.²⁰ He speculates that one of the reasons for this is that this vernacular literature is forced and compelled by white oppression to cater only to a school readership. Mphahlele argues that these major African writers seem ambivalently and complexly to have found the dialectic between tradition and modernity unresolvable. In his estimation, A. C. Jordan's *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya (The Wrath of the Ancestors)* constitutes a significant departure from this tradition because the novel brings profound intellectual themes and perspectives in its portrayal of the conflict between African traditional societies and Western Christianity. Another new departure he finds in the short stories of Peter Abrahams written in English which are wholly preoccupied with modernity. This generic form which was establishing by Abrahams in South Africa (not in the sense that he was the first one to write it, but rather, his practice and inflection of it established its hegemony) was to be continued by the Drum writers of the 1950s, a literary 'movement' to which he was subsequently to belong. Mphahlele makes a critique of the short stories Drum writers as too much concerned with sex and crime, making themselves just poor imitations of Hollywood and American thrillers. He argues that modern African writers who write in English had still to produce a virile literature.²¹ Although making this criticism, Mphahlele stated that no writer should be told what to do: in

¹⁹ Ezekiel Mphahlele, "Thoughts on Literature among Africans", *Liberation*, no. 12, September 1955.

²⁰ "With time Mphahlele was to change his views concerning these writers who wrote fiction and poetry in the African languages. His lecture on Solomon T. Plaatje at the University of Bophuthatswana (now University of the North-West) in 1983 is symbolic of this transformation: Es'kia Mphahlele, "Literature: A Necessity or a Public Nuisance: An African View", in *A Collection of Solomon T. Plaatje Memorial Lectures 1981-1992*, Institute of African Studies, University of Bophuthatswana, 1993. But this question of writing African literature in the African languages or European languages was to profoundly haunt Ezekiel Mphahlele as he attempted to assist in the construction of African cultural modernity on the continent in the 1960s: his engagement of the Negritude movement, especially Leopold Sedar Senghor, his establishing of Chemchemi Center in Kenya, and naturally his interaction with the great Nigerian writers (Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe and others).

²¹ Simultaneous with the writing of this 1955 essay, Mphahlele joined *Drum* magazine staff as a literary editor. He attempted to counter the writing of imitative short stories by encouraging the production of short stories modelled on the classicism and realism of Richard Wright and other European masters. The management's frustration of Mphahlele on this issue, was one of the factors that drove him into exile.

³² Ezekiel Mphahlele, "What the South African Negro Reads and Writes", *Presence Africaine*, no. 16, October-November 1957. This essay is the embellishment and elaboration of the themes originally formulated in the 1955 essay.

search for truth and justice, the writer expresses the longings, aspirations and frustrations of a nation and a people. This was a position he was to emphasize repeatedly and trenchantly for nearly a decade in the 1980s as a columnist ('From My Notebook') for the monthly magazine *Tribute*.

The other contextualizing essay also about readership, "What the South African Negro Reads and Writes", was an attempt to formulate an encapsulated conceptual structure of modern South African literary history.²² Also here Mphahlele is preoccupied with the truthfulness of representation in the context of oppressive conditions or circumstances: "The writer, however, refuses to be told what to write by any political clique. . . After all, bitterness is not a healthy state of mind and feeling to revel in... The extreme opposite of overwhelming bitterness is the kind of escapism which produces love, sex and crime literature. Between the two extremes, the Negro writer is trying to find a way. He recognizes two planes of truth: absolute (or ultimate truth), and truth that lives in an historical context. The former does not interest him: he has heard too many versions of it from the Church. But while he sticks to historical truth, he tries to seek, through his writings, beauty in man, that thing in man which has permanence and stands the test of political change. And so, while his literature touches the chords of a brutal past and present, he tries to direct a searching gaze into the misty but hopeful future." Without a doubt, this is one of Mphahlele's philosophical credos concerning any literary project. From his perspective then, understanding the beauty and relativity of truth in representation and avoiding the absolutization of beliefs even under extreme conditions, avoiding bitterness and escapism, is what New African modernity could learn from New Negro modernity in the process of constructing South African modernity. It is because of these possible historical lessons that Mphahlele on behalf of South Africa canvassed large tracts of modern African American literary history. It would not be too farfetched to say that for

Mphahlele Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) was the ur-text of worldly black modernism because of its embodiment of these philosophical principles.²³

Although his major work of literary criticism, *The African Image*, which was the founding moment of African literary criticism, has much more to say about Africa than about the diaspora, for our purposes here the diasporic matters are much more important. The new Chapter "The Blacks: Dialogue across the seas" written specifically for the new 1974 edition opens with the following sentence: "Nowhere in Africa does one find such a strong fellow-feeling towards the American Black as there exists among the Africans in South Africa. . . The African youth in South Africa are irrepressible collectors of jazz records and literature." This statement can find confirmation in an observation made twenty-five years earlier by H. I. E. Dhlomo at the high noon of the New African Movement: "Africans are fond of the American Negroes and often look upon the rapid progress and achievements of this group as an indication, an example, of what the black man here can and must do. One of the chief points in Negro technique in their battle for liberation and progress, is to support and boost as loudly and as widely as possible their individual men and women of talent and achievement. Their patriotism and enthusiasm in this direction are remarkable. . ."²⁴ Dhlomo espoused the idea of the New African Talented Tenth in correspondence to the Du Boisian concept of the New Negro Talented Tenth. Mphahlele, as perhaps one of the last surviving members of the New African Talented Tenth, in this chapter seeks to indicate why and how the acquisition and appropriation of African American culture by Africans in South Africa has enabled them to create and be in synchrony with the culture of modernity. He moves through several generic forms from literature to music and from religious philosophy to political philosophy. Mphahlele

²³ In the Preface to the Second Edition of *The African Image* (Praeger Publishers, New York, [1962] 1974) Mphahlele writes: "There was a time when Richard Wright's *Native Son* was pushed into the background. Some academicians, taking the cue from Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and Nathan A. Scott Jr., ran the novel down on 'aesthetic grounds. They used Ellison and Baldwin as examples of good literary practitioners worthy of imitation, rich enough with symbols and allusions to excite debate in an English class. Now Richard Wright has come back into his own. Because the blacks need his narrative drive and thrust at this time... Wright has thus re-entered the rhetoric of revolt. And yet he himself told us that Bigger Thomas was not conceived merely as a black man: he is the universal rebel."

²⁴ Anonymous (H. I. E. Dhlomo), "Personal And Cultural Achievement", *Ilanga lase Natal*, August 14, 1948.

articulates a longitudinal perspective on the influence of New Negroism on New Africanism: from 1788 when Paul Cuffee and other African Americans organized a scheme of the Free African Society of Philadelphia to emigrate to Africa; Henry Sylvester-Williams and W. E. B. Du Bois organizing the First Pan-African Congress in 1900 in London; Du Bois again organizing in 1911 in London the First World Race Congress in which John Tengo Jabavu and Walter B. Rubusana may have possibly participated; the manifestation of the Garvey movement in the Harlem of the 1920s and its effect in the rural and urban areas of South Africa; Alain Locke's publication of *The New Negro* and among his contributions in it an adulative praise of African art, especially sculpture and mask; Paul Robeson, W. E. B. Du Bois and Max Yergan organizing in 1936 the Council of African Affairs in response to Mussolini's expansionist aggression in Ethiopia; and Langston Hughes and Richard Wright's intervention in Africa in the 1920s and 1950s respectively. At the center of these historical intersections and inter-crossings, Mphahlele places Peter Abraham's reading Richard Wright, Marcus Garvey, Alain Locke, W. E. B. Du Bois and others as one of the most crucial because it in effect brought black literary modernism to South Africa.²⁵ The other intersections brought Pan-Africanism, black nationalism (and transformed into African Nationalism), Garveyism to Africans: all of which were African (in the diasporic sense) political philosophies of modernity. Mphahlele mentions that all of these exchanges and interactions may not have been possible without the survivals of Africa within African American culture(s).

In his second major consideration of the interaction between New Negro modernity and New African modernity, in contrast to the one-way discourse so evident in *The African Image* (a proper representation and characterization of the actuality of the historical situation), in *Voices in the Whirlwind and Other Essays* a serious dialogue of some kind is occurring, of some kind because it is still very much unbalanced and uneven and unequal. The 120-page essay

²⁵ Although Mphahlele analyzes in this fascinating Chapter the importance of other major diasporic intellectuals such Nicolas Guillen in Cuba, Leon Damas in French Guinea, Jacques Rournain and Jean Price-Mars in Haiti, in their impact and influence on Africa, they are not of immediate concern to us here.

"Voices in the Whirlwind: Poetry and Conflict in the Black World" which gives entitlement to the whole volume is an inquiry to the meaning and function of African American poetry from Gwendolyn Brooks onwards. The African poetry of Dennis Brutus, Wole Soyinka, David Diop and Keorapetse Kgositsile is utilized for contrastive purposes. The real object of analysis in Mphahlele's essay is the poetic form and the poetics of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s.²⁶ The real African object of comparative contrast to the Black Power cultural movement is the Sophiatown Renaissance of the 1950s. Both books then, in successively counterposing the Harlem Renaissance to the first two intellectual generations of the New African Movement and the Black Arts Movement to the Sophiatown Renaissance, were attempting to chart and map the cultural splay of black modernities across the 'Black Atlantic' in the first half of the twentieth century. Both books were landmarks in African literary criticism and cultural criticism, if nothing else, in the sense of being the first of a kind. The concept of poetry with which Mphahlele constructs the historical unity of the Black Arts Movement and Sophiatown Renaissance is taken from Christopher Caudwell's *Illusion and Reality*, where English Marxist critic writes: "Poetry expresses the freedom which inheres in man's general timeless unity in society; it is interested in society as the sum and guardian of common instinctive tendencies; it speaks of death, love, hope, sorrow, . . . as all men experience them."²⁷ Utilizing this concept, Mphahlele moves across the poetic form of Larry Neal, Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, Sonia Sanchez, and stops at Amiri Baraka for a long consideration of his achievement. It is in analyzing the possible historical lessons African American poetry had for South African poetry that Mphahlele both articulates his conception of poetry as well as in effect arguing for the inseparability of New Negro modernity and New African modernity in the black cultural history of the twentieth century (a theme that resonates throughout South African intellectual history in our time): "South African Negro writers wield the language of prose effectively but not of

²⁶ Mphahlele's *Voices in the Whirlwind and Other Essays* triggered a wide-ranging debate between himself, a cultural critic within the Sophiatown Renaissance and Addison Gayle, a cultural critic within the Black Arts Movement: *Black World*, July 1973 and January 1974. Since we commented on this debate extensively elsewhere, we refrain from saying anything here.

²⁷ Cited in *Voices in the Whirlwind and Other Essays*, p. 8.

poetry. We lost the heritage of our Bantu poetry which spoke a metaphor and allegory that were native to us. When we were compelled to master English as a lingua franca to meet the demands of black nationalism, when we could have returned to our indigenous languages with dignity (both in oral and written forms), the white rulers had boxed them up and begun to promote literatures in them that glorified white rule and the policy of ethnic divisions... And maybe just as our prose writers and jazz musicians learned a lot from American Negro artists, we shall yet find we want to take a leaf from the driving pressurized verse of the Americans, if only because it represents a release of language and a celebration of survival... The black American poets of this half of the twentieth century have, by and large, tacitly and aloud, made a pact to subordinate the individual temperament or will to the creation of a poetry that will be a black expression, a black revolt, a realization of a black consciousness, available to all black men who respond to the battle cry."²⁸ It was perhaps this perceived and actual influence of African American culture on South African culture that inspired Mphahlele to write his third and by far the most extensive and comprehensive appraisal of African American modernity by any New African intellectual, or for that matter, by any South African scholar or critic. After Mphahlele there seems not have been much anymore to say on this matter. It is in this regard that Mphahlele has been a culminative and cumulative node in South African intellectual history.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 97-8, my emphasis. We can find confirmation of Mphahlele's thesis in the great Zulu poet and novelist, Benedict Vilakazi, whose dissertation *The Oral and Written Literature in Nguni* (1946, University of Witwatersrand) argued that all African poets in South Africa (writing in both African and European languages) should take inspiration from Langston Hughes. Elsewhere in the dissertation, he wrote the following: "Therefore the African indolently continued to accept the mental status assigned to him by other races, until lately, when some benevolent Missionary bodies sent promising students overseas to study the progress of the Negroes in America. On their return these Africans were able to talk from first hand information about the achievement of the descendants of slaves and possibilities of refuting the argument already advanced about the inferiority of Africans [p. 319]... After reading [Emman H. A.] Made's book, one cannot help feeling the influence of the story of the prodigal son and at the same time remembering Richard Wright's *Native Son* [p. 344]... It would be most advantageous for educationists and social workers if they would study theatrical developments among the Negroes, with a view to transferring them to African schools [p. 355]." By no means not all New African intellectuals and writers were enthralled and enamored with African American intellectual culture.

Shifting his focus and perspective from the discourse between South Africa and United States to that between United States and Africa, that is between African Americans and Africans, in the five essays he wrote for Chinua Achebe's journal *Okike: An African Journal of New Writing*, Mphahlele canvassed modern African American literary history in order to formulate several theses as for its significance and meaning for Africa.²⁹ He begins by indicating that while African American intellectuals have reached out to Africa since the beginning of the century, independent Africa has not had the psychological will to study black Americans; and also African Americans are constantly searching for a base in Africa because of the need to establish a sense of continuity of their cultural heritage. African American intellectuals such as, W. E. B. Du Bois, through his voluminous writings as well as in assembling *Encyclopaedia Africana*, G. Carter Woodson, in founding the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, Paul Robeson together with Du Bois and Max Yergan, in launching the Council of African Affairs, James Baldwin and Malcolm X, separately visiting Africa in the 1960s, were all part of the search to find their historical location in relation to Africa. Mphahlele mentions that African American organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Black Panther Party, the Black Muslims, the Urban League, the Congress of Racial Equality and others, have also, in their particular way, struggled with the complex issues of identity which Du Bois characterized as 'double-consciousness', the dialectic between Americanism and Negroism, or between Africanness and Americanness. The inference he makes is that by questing for a deeper knowledge of history, African Americans had attained a sense of historical location and identity which is inseparable from an awareness of their origins in Africa. Likewise, Africans, in constructing their authentic history would have a profound knowledge of themselves, which would inform them of the necessity of the connection to the African diaspora, especially on matters concerning modernity. Seeing Harlem at one time as having been poised in mediating this

²⁹ Ezekiel Mphahlele: "From the Black American World", no. 4, December 1973; "From the Black American World, II", no. 5, June 1974; "Notes From the Black American World: III", no. 8, July 1975; "Notes From the Black American World: IV: Images of Africa in Afro-American Literature", no. 10, May 1976; "Notes From the Black American World: Images of Africa in Afro-American Literature --- Conclusion", no. 11, November/ December 1976.

ongoing actual and possible discourse between Africa and America, Mphahlele acutely notes: "Time will tell how far on the vertical, horizontal and time scales this desire to reach out to Africa will go; how Africa will respond outside of protocol; what the imperatives and actualities will turn out to be in the game of getting to know one another across the Atlantic. The black worlds do not really know each other. Come to think of it, how much do we Africans know one another?" What is fascinating about Mphahlele is that what he brings to completion or fuller elaboration is the relation between New Negro modernity and New African modernity, and what he opens within the continent, is the discourse between various emergent African modernities (or between African national literatures) as will be apparent in a moment.³⁰

Concentrating on the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks, Mphahlele particularizes and elaborates further on what lessons African American modernity had for African modernities. Giving a detailed reading of Brooks four books of poems (*A Street in Bronzeville* [1945], *Annie Allen* [1949], *The Bean Eaters* [1960], *In the Mecca* [1968]) in the literary context of the achievements of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry, and tabulating her specific themes concerning motherhood, death, funerals, mother-child relationships, search for the essential forms of the human, Mphahlele emphasizes that Africa would learn much from her achieved synthesis: between the urgency of a social situation and the quality of life that defies social, political and legal remedies, or between rejection and acceptance. What also fascinated the critical imagination of Mphahlele about Brooks' poetry was its unique blending of the African (black) element and the universal. Her poetic tone was also found compelling: a contemplative mood achieved through dramatic elements; powerful feelings attained through a driving diction; and construction of individual dramas which have tenuous reference or relationship with national drama of social upheavals. From

³⁰This should not be taken as positing South African New African intellectuals, or one of their last representative Ezekiel Mphahlele, as originator(s) of modernistic intellectual and cultural sensibilities in Africa. In fact, in their collective text constructed as a gallery of portraits of both traditional and modern intellectual and political leaders, representing their historical vision of modernity, priority is given to West Africans: Dr. J. E. K. Aggrey, Dr. Wilmot Blyden (originally

Gwendolyn Brooks Mphahlele moved to contrast the Harlem Renaissance poets (Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, James Weldon Johnson) with the Black Arts Movement poets (Amiri Baraka, Ted Joans, Larry Neal, Askia Muhammad Toure). The former was the beginning point of twentieth-century modernistic poetic sensibility, going beyond the attainments of Paul Laurence Dunbar; Christian symbology emerges fully in its poetry, as though it were an indictment of European Americans as unworthy custodians of the faith; Christ's agony is taken as representing the condition of African Americans. The latter cultural movement is characterized not only by combativeness, but also by intuitive and mystical elements; an unending search for interconnectedness --- distinguishing between a false sense of discovery or certitude and the genuine sense of what actually exists; and lastly, the dramatization of the self and the involvement of the public in a ritualization of the spiritual forces. Shifting his focus yet again, meditating on the achievements of the playwright Lorraine Hansberry (1930-65), Mphahlele ponders the dilemma of African American intellectuals and writers: how to assert an ethnic identity while expanding one's cosmopolitan horizons. Mphahlele himself is an exemplification of a resolution of this historical issue: a truly African cosmopolitan intellectual in whose beingness his Pedi ethnic identity has not been negated.³¹ In the last essay for *Okike* which covers the literary span from Gustavus Vassa (1745-1797) to Melvin B. Tolson (1900-1966), Mphahlele concludes with, in effect, a series of meditative reflections: "We have come a long way from the sixteenth century, but in spite of the much greater mobility of the Afro-american today, in spite of all he has assimilated from his AngloSaxon environment, Africa still haunts him. Always with the emergence of a new cycle of black consciousness, Africa features prominently in Afro-American literature... Of all the poets who became famous in the 1920s, probably of all the Afro-American poets, Langston Hughes (1902-1967) was the most intimately acquainted with Africa... The image of Africa in the AfroAmerican mind of the sixties and the seventies has become

from the Antilles), Bishop Samuel Adjai Crowther and others (see: *The African Yearly Register*, edited by T. D. Mwelil Skota, 1930).

³¹ A comprehensive appraisal of Ezekiel Mphahlele would need to tax him on his irrational hostility to African literature in the African languages. It is interesting and intriguing to reflect on what Benedict Wallet Vilakazi would thought of Ezekiel Mphahlele's stance!

more complex than ever before. . . Let us right at the outset acknowledge that in social terms the African-American's feelings about Africa are an on-going process." With the possible exception of his great Pedi predecessor R. V. Selope Thema, it is doubtful whether there has been a New African intellectual who has been so agonizingly haunted by African American culture as Ezekiel Mphahlele has been! What is extraordinary is that Mphahlele was able effortlessly to dramatically shift his intellectual preoccupations from African American modernity to the making of the emergent African literary modernities in the 1960s when African necessity compelled such a transformation in identification: this was a demand of the politics of decolonization.

It is not absolutely imperative here to determine whether Mphahlele in contributing to Chinua Achebe's journal his major appraisal of African American literary culture was in response to his scholarly preoccupations as a professor of literature in an American university (Universities of Denver and Pennsylvania) or whether it was because of the lingering legacy of New African intellectual culture in South Africa which had come to an 'end' in 1960 as a necessary historical narrative. It is sufficient for our purposes that Mphahlele's essay of 1960 on Langston Hughes testifies to his great identification and commitment to modern African American literary culture. It was also in this year that he encountered United States for the first time as a living experience. In an essay, appropriately entitled "An African in America", Mphahlele relates his first encounter with the country of Duke Ellington and William Faulkner.³² Invited to Boston in early 1962 by the State Department's commission on UNESCO for a conference on Africa in relation to United States, Mphahlele met there fellow compatriots: Lewis Nkosi, Selby Ngcobo, Selby Mvusi and Absalom Vilakazi. At this time Mphahlele was the director for African Programmes of the Congress for Cultural Freedom based in Paris. Not saying much about the conference itself, presumably because it rehearsed conventional wisdom and endless banalities, if not an implicit Communist agenda, Mphahlele concentrates on the question of political and

³²Zeke' Mphahlele, "An African in America", *Fighting Talk*, February 1962. The essay recalls in part his 1960 and 1961 visits to Philadelphia, Washington, Chicago and New York.

cultural identity on the part of African Americans in the context of white domination and white supremacist ideologies. He holds Paul Robeson and W. E. B. Du Bois as exemplary figures. By this time Du Bois was a member of the American Communist Party and Robeson was an uncompromising and an unrepentant Communist sympathizer. Since Mphahlele announces publicly in this essay that he is not a Communist, it is very unfortunate that he never explored anywhere in depth why these great figures held a deep fascination in his imagination: that is explore the intercrossing of Communism and Nationalism in their political and cultural praxis from the perspective of his Humanism.³³ Critical of what he perceives as the obsessive nature of American anti-Communism, Mphahlele does not explain his own reservations about the philosophy of Antonio Gramsci and C. L. R. James. But then, Mphahlele was following in the narrative pattern of the New African Movement, which like the Americans was obsessively anti-Communist.³⁴ An interest in Robeson and Du Bois should have inspired Mphahlele into a deeper exploration of their unique form of modernism and modernity.

This essay was for all intents and purposes a valedictory signature to the great narrative of the discourse between New Negro modernity and New African modernity within the historical edicts of the New African African because with the independence of many African countries in 1960 the continent officially announced the politics of decolonization. Of course the politics of decolonization had been manifesting themselves for nearly a decade before the official pronouncement, arguably from 1954 when the Algerian Revolution against French colonialism and domination broke-out. The ideology of the politics of decolonization was African Nationalism.³⁵

³³It is very unfortunate that Ezekiel Mphahlele never explored this fundamental theme in any of his voluminous writings, for as Walter Benjamin, Cesar Vallejo, Theodor Adorno, Frida Kahlo, Tina Modotti, Louis Aragon, Sergei Eisenstein, Albert Nzula, Jose Carlos Mariategui and many others have taught us: the inseparability of Marxism and modernism was a critical narrative of the twentieth-century.

³⁴In the aforementioned monograph on H. I. E. Dhlomo, we have attempted to historicize the anti-Communism of the New African Movement.

³⁵ With the rupture and termination of the New African Movement in 1960, the historical dialogue between United States and South Africa reconstituted itself anew in the 1970s between Black Power Liberation and the Black Arts Movement on the North side, and the

Mphahlele was able to easily engage himself in exile in Africa with the matter of African Nationalism because it had already been broached within the New African Movement by the ANC Youth League in the 1940s. It was the Youth Leaguers such as Anton Lembede, Jordan Ngubane, A. P. Mda, Walter Sisulu, Nelson Mandela who were the first serious theoreticians of African Nationalism, in the sense of its theorization, attempted systematization, articulation, within the New African Movement.³⁶ Previous to them, from Walter Rubusana through Silas Modiri Molema to H. I. E. Dhlomo, the Movement was guided in the avant-garde position by nationalist ideologues. The two New African intellectuals who possibly anticipated the Youth Leaguers on this matter were Z. K. Matthews and Govan Mbeki. Jordan Ngubane provides the following definition of African Nationalism: "The starting point of African Nationalism is the historical or even the prehistoric position. Africa was, has been and still is, a black man's continent. The Europeans who now occupy large tracts of Africa, dispossessed the rightful owners by force of arms and they began to exploit the labour power of the Africans and the natural resources of the country, for their own benefit, and for the benefit of their countrymen across the seas. Although the Africans were defeated and subjugated, they did not give up their claim to Africa, and the fact that their land was taken away and their human rights whittled down, did not take away

Black Consciousness Movement and the *Staffrider* writers on the South side. The latter were totally different historical matters.

³⁶Of course pre-1960 there were many brilliant African ideologues of African Nationalism. Just to name a few: Kwame Nkrumah, Mzansi Azikiwe, Jomo Kenyatta, Harry Thuku, Blaise Diagne and many others. The date 1960s is crucial because the ideologue of African Nationalism was put into practical utility of constructing of African nation-states. Nkrumah began this in 1957 in Ghana, when Mphahlele left South Africa for Nigerian exile. We can note here some of the writings by the Youth Leaguers on African Nationalism in their intellectual or ideological forum *Inkundla ya Bantu*: Anton Lembede, "National Unity Among African Tribes", Second Fortnight 1945; "In Defence of Nationalism", February 27, 1947; Jordan Ngubane, "What African Nationalism Is", September 25, 1948; "African Nationalism Marches On In The Continent", August 6, 1949; A. P. Mda, "Mr. Mda Replies to Kanyisa", September 18, 1948. In the first anniversary tribute of the death of Anton Lembede, A. P. Mda writes: "The late Lembede was the first to give clear emphasis to the creed of African Nationalism, and be thus crystallized, and gave impetus to the forces of African National freedom... We, African Nationalist of the Congress Youth League, salute the dead hero, and in doing, we appeal to the African Youth throughout South Africa to follow suit" ("The Late A. M. Lembede Esq. M. A., L. L. B., Attorney at Law", *Inkundla ya Bantu*, August 14, 1948).

their right to Africa."³⁷ There is no reason for not believing that Ezekiel Mphahlele would subscribe to such a definition of African Nationalism.

The prescience of Mphahlele on the matter of African Nationalism was in recognizing that for him as a man of letters this ideology defined a particular project which he had to undertake: facilitating the emergence of African national literatures. Mphahlele was one of the most important pushing for this monumental undertaking, cross cutting the continent many times in the early 1960s, encouraging conferences, seminars and encouraging the creation of institutions, magazines, journals, writers' workshop and cultural centers, that would make its realization possible. For this extraordinary achievement Mphahlele was to earn the utmost respect of some of the leading African intellectuals and writers then: Leopold Sedar Senghor from Senegal, Christopher Okigbo from Nigeria, Kofi Awonor from Ghana, Ngugi wa Thiongo from Kenya, Bernard Dadie from Ivory Coast, David Rubadiri from Malawi and many others." All these major African intellectuals and writers partook in the construction of national literatures in Africa. But before delving further into this historic achievement, another historical precedent needs to be indicated, since it made possible his continental undertaking. This is the fact that Mphahlele going to self imposed exile in Nigeria in 1957 was not only a premonition that the Sophiatown Renaissance was coming to an 'end', but the actual act of his going to exile began or opened the phenomenon of the Exile Period in South African intellectual and cultural history.³⁸

³⁷ Jordan Ngubane, "What African Nationalism Is", *ibid*. It should be noted that relationship between Jordan Ngubane and Ezekiel Mphahlele, from the moment of the return of the former from exile in 1980 to his death in 1985, was of profound warmth; whereas in exile it seems to have been cold from the time of their clash at the aforementioned 1958 The All-African People's Conference, Mphahlele representing the ANC (given instructions by Nelson Mandela, then President-General of the Transvaal ANC) and Ngubane representing the Liberal Party.

³⁸ Mphahlele was to earn the long lasting respect of Leopold Sedar Senghor, that on the 90th birthday of the great poet in 1996 he was invited to make an honorary presentation in celebration: "Leopold Sedar Senghor: His Place in the Development of African Literature" (as yet unpublished). The first paragraph of this presentation confirms what we are attempting to theorize here: "I met Leopold Sedar Senghor for the first time in 1962 in Dakar, Senegal. He was then President of his country. When we met again in 1963 I had, under the sponsorship of the international cultural organization I was working for in Paris, convened two conferences in Freetown, Sierra Leone and Dakar on African Literature. We were prompting an ongoing campaign to have this discipline included in tertiary curricula all over Africa. Senghor gave us his unqualified support, putting the full weight of his literary prestige on the crusade, plus the

Neither the stowing away to England by Peter Abrahams in 1939 nor the self-exiling of Gerald Sekoto in 1948 to Paris had the precedence of opening an 'option' for two or three generations of South Africans.³⁹ It is this precedent setting nature of his going to exile, as well as his intellectual and scholarly activities in exile (strengthening and bringing to an ending the dialectical unity of New Negro modernity and New African modernity, and the establishing of

wholesome esteem francophone Africa held in him" (my italics). Wole Soyinka also participated in this event:

³⁹ Given his first exile experience in Lesotho (then Basutoland) from 1954-5 which seems to have left him in bitterness, one would not have expected that within two he would be in exile in Nigeria. But then, the South African white minority government was determined to make it impossible for him to earn a living as a teacher, because of his uncompromising opposition and hostility to Bantu education. This is what Mphahlele has written of his Lesotho exile experience: "When I was there I realised that most of you had ceased to care and were just drifting, as long as a little cash came in from the Union. I also realised that too many of you were slaves to Missionary teaching. You have allowed different church denominations to fight over your soil in order to capture your souls. And now too many of you think it is un-Christian to fight for your rights. The Missionary gave you the Bible to chew upon, and took the praise of having made Basutoland a 'peaceful country.' I looked this way and that, but could see no sign of awakening among you--none of the wisdom of your King, Moshoeshe; none of the fight your forefathers had" ("Why I Left Basutoland", *Mohlalabi*, Loetse/ September, 1955). This denunciation is so uncharacteristic of Ezekiel Mphahlele. It is for Lesotho scholars to unravel its mystery. In contrast to this Lesotho experience, in a private conversation at Pitzer College in California in March 1999, Mphahlele expressed his total happiness with his Nigerian exile experience. In one of these conversations he expressed his utmost admiration for the major Lesotho writer, B. M. Khaketla. 'What Mphahlele began in 1957 was to become a deluge, followed by Bloke Modisane in 1959, Lewis Nkosi in 1960, and many others later. The last paragraph of Modisane's Sophiatown Renaissance classic autobiography *Blame Me On History* (1963) has a strange image of this experience of going to exile: "Then the train entered and puffed its way out of Mafeking, and South Africa and everything I had known, loved and hated remained behind me. I was out of South Africa. But it was no victory or solution, the compulsive agony was still with me, the problem was still with me; only its immediacy was removed, like an organism in bed, the tension was released but the filth slided down my thigh dripping on to the sheet. My physical life in South Africa had ended" (p.311). Lewis Nkosi who had taken Bloke Modisane to Park Railway Station for the train to exile, wrote these reflections within a few days of his departure: "Bloke Modisane is the man who, in the language of Sophiatown, recently 'baled out' of the country after having been refused a passport by the Government. I can't think of any man, with possible exception of Zeke Mphahlele, who is more qualified to talk on this subject. . . I know some spiritually under-privileged people have suggested that this is a snobbish desire in the creative artist to flee from his people. I know this to be untrue because while Sophiatown remained intact we felt that we could endure, at least to some extent... There was even talk amongst the more ambitious of us of creating a Sophiatown literature which would declare adequately the social experience of the people who belonged to what we considered a unique non-white community" ("Why 'Bloke' Baled Out", *Contact*, July 11, 1959). The destruction of Sophiatown shattered the creative psyche of the Sophiatown literary generation. In a private conversation in January 1989 in Warsaw (barely two years after the passing away of Modisane in 1986 in Dortmund, West Germany) Lewis Nkosi expressed his sadness that his review in the *London Guardian* of Modisane's autobiography immediately on its appearance, for all intents and purposes ended the friendship between them. Despite this, note the very brilliant "Introduction" by Lewis Nkosi to the new 1990 Penguin Books edition of *Blame Me On History*. Truly, a historic document. Probably its singular importance explains its reprinting in *Southern African Review of Books*, Double Issue, no. 13/14 (1990).

the opening pathways of the constitutive and regulative principles of African national literatures as a collective and continental ensemble), that makes Mphahlele's exile experience the most spectacular and consequential of South African intellectual exiles: it brought to a closer proximity the unity of the modern black world. By any measure this is a remarkable achievement.

From the time he left Jan Smuts Airport on September 6th, 1957, being seen off by Bloke Modisane, at the age of thirty-seven, Mphahlele seems to have been predestined for his encounter with Nigeria and with the African continent itself. An autobiographical essay, "On the Long Road: From An African Autobiography", memorably captures this moment of exiting from 'apartheid nightmare' in one part of Africa and entering 'the challenges' of another part of the continent.⁴⁰ At a boys' grammar school in Lagos where he taught for the fifteen months of his exile in Nigeria, Mphahlele engaged the complexities of a British colony that was moving towards independence in 1960. When he later moved to the Extra-Mural Studies of the University of Lagos saw closely the historical divides of Nigeria: the defiant posture of the Ibos, the sub-servience of the Hausas and the Fulanis, the critical skepticism of the Ibos; the uneasy co-existence between Islam and Christianity; the illiteracy and backwardness of the North, in contrast to the development and the highly educated Africans of the South; the differential quality of the leadership of Mbandi Azikiwe and Sir Ahmadu Bello. The experiencing of Nigeria seems to have left Mphahlele with the historical awareness of the class factor in relation to the race factor which the lived experience of South Africa had so deeply imprinted on his consciousness: "I have no romantic ideas about Africans or Nigerians, only a vague feeling that where race conflicts are negligible, Africans can treat one another decently. I have no illusions about the fact that the problem of haves and have-nots is a universal one (and that in Southern Africa it is only magnified by colour prejudice). But I was not prepared for the rude shock that assailed me. I saw times without number the manner in which Nigerians treated their domestic servants, chauffeurs, and other workers. A man who

⁴⁰Ezekiel Mphahlele, "On the Long Road: From An African Autobiography", *Encounter*, vol. xxii no. 2, February 1964.

considers his social or economic status to be high, whether he is literate or not, treats his domestics in a way I have come to associate only with the white man in the south. As in the rest of Africa, the monied African is seldom literate.⁴¹ But unfortunately this sociological awareness of the class factor in African history was obviated by a historical prejudice he acquired in Nigeria, which in actuality was merely a confirmation of a legacy he had already inherited within the New African Movement. In another essay, "A South African in Nigeria", also reflecting on these historical transitions, Mphahlele wrote: "And so you go from one experience to another. Yes, you're a foreigner; but then justly one, not a foreigner in your native land. Soon I shall be visiting Ibadan in the north, the centre of Nigeria's intellectual and cultural life. I know that I am in for more startling experiences. The contrasts are very sharp between the black man's life in South Africa and in Nigeria... Here I am, breathing the ordinary air of freedom and testing its salty freshness as I stand on the bridge, looking out across the glistening ripples of the lagoon. I am in the midst of a friendly people whose temperament has nothing to do with the romantic idea of the savagery, the torrid mood of the Equator... There are problems like tribal and language divisions which run deeper than many people here care to admit... Again, West African communities are so feudal that one doesn't know what changes independence will bring in the distribution of the country's income. At present the wealth of the country is in the hands of a small minority. . . Naturally, the politics of a black nationalist state do not have the turbulent clashes that characterize the South African scene. . . Nigerians, generally, are anti-Communist. Their trade unions and political leaders, their press, often speak of removing 'Communist elements.' A number of people I have met don't have the slightest idea what Communism is --- or socialism. They simply have a religious belief that it is something to be rejected. Yet I am also told that people don't starve to death here, because communal living still exercises a powerful influence on Nigerian life, as it does in the rest of Africa."⁴² Two observations here. First, in his whole 20-year

⁴¹ Ezekiel Mphahlele, "A South African in Nigeria", *Africa South*, vol. 3 no. 4, July-September 1959.

⁴² Although anti-Communism was predominant in the history of the ANC inside the country. The traumatizing and trying experience of the organization in exile forced it to make flirtatious gestures towards Marxism and Communism. This never impressed itself on Ezekiel

intellectual odyssey of exile, wherever he was situated, Mphahlele always strove to grasp of the historical forces and structural constraints determinant in that particular nation-state, particularly concerning cultural matters. No other South African intellectual who was in exile can match Mphahlele on this conceptual level. Related to this, again no other South African intellectual and political exile matched Mphahlele on his extraordinary intellectual engagement with Africa. This is the fundamental reason for the great admiration for him expressed by intellectuals such as Wole Soyinka, Houston A. Baker, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Henry Louis Gates (see the epigraph), Sonia Sanchez, Ulli E. Beier. Secondly, Mphahlele imbibed the anti-Communist intellectual prejudice of modern Nigerian intellectuals (read Wole Soyinka) and of the New African Movement (read H. I. E. Dhlomo). Being a highly refined intellectual, Mphahlele never expressed his hostility through writing, rather, it came through his eloquently studied indifference.⁴³ The crucial point here is that Mphahlele encountered the actuality of the colossus of African Nationalism, in his engagement with Africa, in the form of the African Independence Movement from Ghana in 1957 to Zimbabwe and Namibia in 1980. Of course this ideology which was triumphalist in the 1960s could not mitigate or mediate the disasters of African political modernities from the Nigerian Civil War 1967-70 to the Civil War in the Democratic Republic of the Congo following the overthrow of Mobutu in 1996, when the African nation-states were threatening to disintegrate into various fractures. Today the theorization of African Nationalism as the ideology of African history has disappeared.

But in the 1960s the triumphalism of African Nationalism was the order of the day. Although Mphahlele subscribed to this ideology, he himself never partook in this illusion of triumphalism. In the early 1960s he wrote a series of articles

Mphahlele. This is the reason that since 1994 the organization has kept him at a distance, suspected of being a closet Black (cultural) Nationalist. Elsewhere it will be necessary to examine the dialectic between Marxism and African Nationalism within the New African Movement.

⁴³ Ezekiel Mphahlele, "Nigeria on the Eve of Independence", *Africa Today*, October 1960. There are other essays written at this time on other African countries that will not concern us here: "Letter from Lagos: Zeke Mphahlele Introduces Nigeria", *Fighting Talk*, June/July 1958; Letter from Lagos: 'Zeke Mphahlele Writes on Nigeria', *Fighting Talk*, actual date misplaced; "'Oh, say have you seen. . .'", *Fighting Talk*, March 1962; "From an African Notebook", *Fighting Talk*, September 1962; "The Pebble in the Rice: Zeke Mphahlele writes on Southern Rhodesia", *Fighting Talk*, November 1962.

in various forums, particularly in Ruth First's *Fighting Talk*, in which he examined the making or the unmaking of African political modernities through the practices and events of the African Independence Movement. From the struggles of the African people in South Africa in the 1950s and the defeat of African Nationalism by White Nationalism (of Afrikaners and English speaking whites) in that decade, Mphahlele seems to have drawn a historical lesson which made him critical of the limitations of African Nationalism: the disjuncture between politics and culture in its historical practices. It is this disjuncture which he saw as the explanation for what he perceived to be the failure of the ANC to fight vigorously in the 1950s the educational policies and consequences of Bantu Education. Mphahlele seems to have seen this failure as undergirded by a hidden and unarticulated assumption or epistemological position: that politics are primary, or for that matter superior, to culture. Not necessarily contesting this position, Mphahlele saw in it a danger of making one believe that political practices are realizable in ignorance of their cultural content. Mphahlele believed in the inseparable dialectic between culture and politics. It would not be a mis-representation of his epistemological position in indicating that there are historical conditions or circumstances in which Mphahlele would give precedence to culture over politics: that culture can or should formulate directives for politics. It this weakness of African Nationalism that he first noticed in South Africa a decade earlier that he saw repeated in Nigeria.

In a very brilliant and tragically prophetic essay, "Nigeria on the Eve of Independence", Mphahlele argues that politics alone will be unable to hold Nigeria as a unified state or as a single nation-state.⁴⁴ Culture must also be

⁴⁴ Editorial", *Black Orpheus*, no. 1, September 1957, my italics. In all probability it was written by Ulli Beier. *Black Orpheus* was inspired by *Presence Africaine* established by Alioune Diop in Paris in 1947. It is astonishing how the name of Ezekiel Mphahlele prominently features in a book on the two great African cultural and political reviews of the 1950s and 1960s: Peter Benson, *Black Orpheus, Transition, and Modern Cultural Awakening in Africa* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1986). It is also somewhat surprising that the first anthology of writings (short stories) from *Black Orpheus* assembled by Ulli Beier, South Africa (Ezekiel Mphahlele, Alex La Guma, Bloke Modisane) has the same number of representations as Nigeria (D. O. Fagunwa, Cyprian Ekwensi and Gabriel Okara): Ulli Beier (ed.), *Black Orpheus: An anthology of new African and Afro-American stories* (McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1965). Stating the obvious, a study needs to be written about the intersection of Nigerian and South African modern cultures in the twentieth-century. While

part of the unifying process or structure of African Nationalism. What is extraordinary is that even before the crisis of 1966 and the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War, Mphahlele was already working with other African intellectuals in creating and making modern African national literature(s) that could be viable centralizing processes of African Nationalism. By the time he wrote this essay, Mphahlele had already begun travelling extensively in Africa. In other words, like Frantz Fanon, Mphahlele had first hand knowledge of Africa thereby making a serious student of African history and societies. It is very intriguing that Frantz Fanon and Ezekiel Mphahlele seemed to have had similar positions concerning culture and politics in the historic epoch of decolonization: this may explain the spell-binding hold of Fanon on Mphahlele at the 1958 Conference in Accra. There are major differences in them that need not detain us here. What does Mphahlele formulate in this essay that is such a revelation? He begins by observing that the pretense of unity by the political forces at the forefront of Nigerian Independence Movement intended for external observers just a few months before independence cannot hide the deep-rooted historical fractures that are regionally based but destabilizing the center. He then maps the triangular structure of the political struggle between Sir Ahmadu Bello's Northern People's Congress (N. P. C.), Mbandi Azikiwe's National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (N. C. N. C.), and Chief Awolowo's Action Group (A. G.). He comments that 'each regional ruling party generally reflects the traits of the national group it governs.' Although Mphahlele makes an astute political analysis, that is not of immediate importance to us. What is important are his reflections on the role of intellectuals and the necessity of creating new ideas. He is very critical of the intelligentsia class for abandoning their professional work in the civic sector for administrative political positions because they give more economic remuneration. By doing this, they dissipate their enormous energies in factional rivalries, instead of developing a broad range of national cultural interests as well as exerting a national corporate influence on the country. It is remarkable how this criticism is similar to that Fanon was formulating in *The Wretched of*

spending two years (1983-5) in exile in Bayreuth, West Germany, I had occasion to spend many hours conversing with Ulli Beier, who then held a Chair in African Cultures and Studies at the University of Bayreuth. He always spoke warmly of Ezekiel Mphahlele.

the Earth. Fanon's critique of the national bourgeoisie and the national intelligentsia is unfolded with more passion and anger, but they reflect the same historical perspective as that of Mphahlele. In a statement Fanon would have whole-heartedly approved of, Mphahlele writes: "Colonialism has an uncanny way of creating a host of ugly paradoxes by which it thrives." Mphahlele calls for the creation of new ideas and intellectual resistance to the disintegrative forces which were beginning to unleash themselves in Africa. Then making an uncommon and cute historical connection between two regions of the continent which still resonates to the present, Mphahlele concluded this historic essay with these words: "If the challenge of independence can act on the Nigerian in anything like the same degree as the challenge of oppression does in South Africa, Nigeria can be a truly great county. Nigeria owes it to herself and to the rest of the continent to make a go of it so as to help liberate, in a Pan-African movement, the rest of the African peoples, numbering at least twice as many as free West Africans and Congolese." This again is so extraordinarily similar to Fanon's call in his celebrated book for the unity of the continent through regions. What needs to be observed is that the idea of Pan-Africanism which was brought to South Africa by the Ghanaian New African intellectual F. Z. S. Peregrino at the onset of the New African Movement was being disseminated on the continent in West Africa as part of the system of new ideas by arguably the last New African intellectual of the Movement.

By the time Mphahlele wrote this very important essay, he had already been participating with other Nigerian intellectuals (Christopher Okigbo, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and others) in the formulation and construction of new ideas. First, it was his participation on the editorial board of *Black Orpheus* together with Wole Soyinka and Ulli Beier in 1959-60. The cultural and literary review had been founded in 1957 by two Germanistic Africanists: Ulli Beier (Austrian) and Janheinz Jahn (German). Secondly, his activity in Mbari Publications, which which was also founded by Beier through the sponsorship of Congress for Cultural Freedom, enabled Mphahlele to assist in the dissemination of these ideas. It was not accidental that the first works by Alex

La Guma and Dennis Brutus appeared under this publication in Nigeria: respectively *A Walk in the Night* (1962) and *Sirens, Knuckles, Boots* (1963). Mphahlele found a home in *Black Orpheus* in Nigeria which had been so wanting in *Drum* in South Africa. The first Editorial of *Black Orpheus* declared its alignment with a system of new ideas which undoubtedly resonated with Mphahlele's own views on the necessity of a new direction in African cultural history: "A journal devoted to contemporary African literature has long been overdue. The young African writer is struggling hard to build up for himself a literary public in Africa. All too often he has to turn to Europe for criticism and encouragement. It is still possible for a Nigerian child to leave a secondary school with a thorough knowledge of English literature, but without even having heard of such great black writers as Leopold Sedar Senghor or Aime Cesaire. . . *Black Orpheus* will also publish the works of Afro-American writers, because many of these are involved in similar cultural and social situations and their writings are therefore highly relevant to Africans. While it is the primary purpose of this journal to encourage and discuss contemporary African writing, we shall not forget the great traditions of oral literature of the African tribes. For it is on the heritage of the past, that the literature of the future must be based." It probably is because the historical project of the *Black Orpheus* group as well as of Nigerian intellectuals was similar to what the New African Movement had been realizing for decades, that Ezekiel Mphahlele saw a similarity of purposes in their historical vision. What Mphahlele found new and unique in the *Black Orpheus* group, beyond anything the New African Movement had attempted to do, was in creating and fostering a cultural public for the then emergent modern African national literatures. Synthesizing what Frantz Fanon was advocating in *The Wretched of the Earth* and what the *Black Orpheus* group was undertaking in its review, Mphahlele, in his task as Director of African Programmes for the Congress for Cultural Freedom, undertook as his task the fostering and creating of cultural publics for the emergent modern African national cultures as well as for modern African national literatures. His contribution to African Nationalism and to PanAfricanism would be in these two cultural fields within modernity.

One major way Mphahlele sought to create and foster public space(s) and cultural space(s) for new African cultural practices was to sponsor three historic conferences through the Congress for Cultural Freedom on the historical problems of the then emergent modern African national literatures: the Conference of African Writers of English Expression at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda from the 8th to the 18th of June 1962; the Dakar Conference on French Literature in Senegal from the 23rd to the 26th of March 1963; and the Freetown Conference on African Literature and the University Curriculum in Sierra Leone from the 3rd to the 8th of April 1963. The end-result of each of these conferences, which was not necessarily pre-planned, was a historical problem which the making of African modernities had to confront: at the Kampala conference the issue was whether the African literature in English written by African writers (Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiongo, Alex La Guma, Ezekiel Mphahlele and others) had any historical legitimacy to such a designation, or whether only the African literature written in the African languages (by Shabaan Roberts, Benedict Vilakazi, Thomas Mofolo, D. O. Fagunwa and others) had legitimacy to be viewed as such; at the Dakar conference the question was the nature of the modernity of the Negritude Movement in representing Africa; at the Freetown conference the fundamental theme was the displacing of the colonial syllabi which placed European literatures at the epi-center of African universities curricula replacing them with African literatures (modern and oral).

In an essay/report on the Kampala Conference he had organized, Mphahlele formulated the critical cultural and literary issues that had necessitated the assembling together of the leading African writers of that era: "How important is the African novel? What are its themes and styles? How does an African writer face up to the problem of translating into a foreign language thoughts and feelings that originally operate in his mother tongue? How can protest writing as we see it in South Africa transcend parochial dimensions? Does the fact that an African writer has to be published overseas not demand from him a false tone?"⁴⁵ One of the merits of this documentation is its awareness of

⁴⁵Ezekiel Mphahlele, "The Makerere Writers' Conference", *African Report*, vol. 7 no. 7, July 1962. In a slightly modified form the essay appeared elsewhere: "Writers of Africa", *Fighting*

the differential nature of African modernities ('the impact of Western civilization on an African culture') in relation to many of these questions. Mphahlele reports that the writers were principally preoccupied with the nature of their audience as well as the problem of writing in European languages when their sensibilities were profoundly African. Also another issue at the center was why South Africa and Nigeria were the leading countries in creative writing. Although no resolutions were arrived at, the Kampala Conference singled out the importance of literary and cultural journals in facilitating forums for creative writing as well as being instruments for the dissemination of new ideas. The most important evaluation of this historic conference was that by the late Cameroonian writer Bernard Fonlon. Although his observations are largely in synchrony with those of Mphahlele, but much more detailed and comprehensive, he emphasized that the question of the Negritude Movement represented one of the most contentious issues in the whole proceedings. Since Mphahlele's position on this matter was to become

Talk, September 1962. In the latter version, Mphahlele mentions Lewis Nkosi as being among the participants, whereas the earlier one only lists Bloke Modisane, Arthur Maimane and himself as the only South Africans present. The arrival of Alex La Guma from South Africa was highly anticipated, but it never occurred because of the refusal of the government to give him a passport. Bloke Modisane in his reflections on the Conference observed: "The conference was presided over by the South African writer Ezekiel Mphahlele, author of *The African Image*... The real meaning, the excitement of the conference was the bringing together of writers working in isolation and knowing each other only as names on the cold page... In discussion, they examined each others' works with precision and at times with asperity. There were critical comments on specific novels, short stories and poems; and then workshops on the novel, play, poem and short story" ("African Writers' Summit", *Transition*, vol. 2 no. 5, July 30-August 29, 1962). Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (then James Ngugi) observations were more directed towards the future: "I wanted to see Ezekiel Mphahlele. I had read his autobiography *Down Second Avenue*, which had struck me as a book of great literary power... It is always something for a creative writer to feel that he is not working in isolation and that there are many others on the same venture... I think, therefore, that one of the important things about the conference was the fact that it was held in East Africa. What may be born here and grow as a result is yet too early to predict. I have no doubt that writers from East Africa will rise. The few I met at Kampala were very enthusiastic and eager to push ahead... If this be so, then I say that the conference at Makerere was a landmark in the cultural awakening of our continent. . . With the death of colonialism, a new society is being born. And with it a new literature" ("A Kenyan at the Conference", *Sunday Nation*, July 1, 1962; reprinted in the same issue as Modisane's essay). Within a year after the Conference Mphahlele had resigned from the Congress for Cultural Freedom, taking a teaching post at University of Nairobi, thereby playing a prominent role in the emergence modern Kenyan national literature. Interestingly Ezekiel Mphahlele in his appraisal of the Kampala Conference does not mention at all the matter of the Negritude Movement. Perhaps what was far more important for him were the practicalities of disseminating throughout Africa the new culture of literary modernity. Also both Bloke Modisane and Ngugi wa Thiong'o by pass this issue. Coming from country in which French literary culture was strong, Bernard Fonlon could not so easily evade this issue.

more controversial in the subsequent related conferences, Fonlon's notations on this issue are more than of mere passing interest: "The quarrel, if I can call it that, between the French-speaking African and the English-speaking African on the subject of Negritude, stems from the difference in the colonial regimes to which they were subjected... Mr. Mphahlele holds that no South African would deny the historical fact of Negritude as protest, nor would he undermine the importance of this role. But he maintains that in South Africa, they are fighting, not for their Negroness, but for their human dignity. With regard to the role of Negritude as a literary expression, he rejects the view that because a man is black he will write like other black men; all Africans are not the same and therefore Negritude cannot be held up as the ideal prescription for all cultural ills in Africa. For Langston Hughes there was nothing mysterious about the notion. Senghor and Cesaire had done exactly what the writers of the Harlem Renaissance did before them, back in the nineteen-twenties; only the Harlemites had not given it a name... I think that the dispute among Africans about Negritude is more about the name than about the thing. All are agreed, at least, on its importance as a protest. And yet protest in Negro literature is the most virile form of Negritude, for as the late Frantz Fanon, the West Indian doctor turned Algerian nationalist, wrote the struggle for national freedom is culture's most sacred act. And Negro culture wherever it is found, whatever form it takes, is one expression of Negritude, if not the most authentic."⁴⁶ Fonlon concludes his brilliant essay on the cultural geography of literary form in Africa: an attempted explanation of why the short story form predominates in South Africa, fiction in Nigeria, and poetry in Ghana. What

⁴⁶ Bernard Fonlon, "Report on the Kampala Conference", *Presence Africaine*, First Quarterly 1963. The essay first appeared in *Abbia*; but the Paris-based great journal does not acknowledge this fact. Fonlon does not seem to have been given the true stature that he deserves that of a major African intellectual. He seems to have been one of the exceptional few participants to have taken the proceedings of the Kampala Conference with the utmost seriousness. Within a year of the Conference he established a cultural and literary review called *Abbia: Cameroon Cultural Review*. The first issue was published in February 1963 and the last seems to have appeared in June 1979. The reason for it not being well known as it should be, may possibly its limited distribution in Africa. But then, the present author was able to consult all the existant copies at California State University in Los Angeles (not a major American educational institution). Fonlon wrote many outstanding essays for his review. Any serious consideration of African cultural history in the 1960s should give a prominent position to this fascinating Cameroonian intellectual. The idea of founding *Abbia* was initiated by the then Minister of Education, William Eteki Mboumoua; and Bernard Fonlon was given the task of realizing and sustaining it (see: Bernard Fonlon, "Ten Years After — A Foreword", *Abbia*, no. 27-8, June 1974).

makes this appraisal so compelling, besides its comprehensiveness and stylistic brilliance, is its associative powers in examining *The Conference of African Writers of English Expression* in relation to the triangular structure of James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones* (1927), Rene Maran's *Batouala* (1921) and Aime Cesaire's *Return to My Native Land* (1936).

While the actual proceedings of the Kampala Conference were never published, those of the subsequent Dakar Conference of French African Literature and Freetown Conference of English African Literature were published: *African Literatures And the Universities*.⁴⁷ The list of African writers participating in each of the last two conferences is formidable. In Dakar the participants included: Leopold Sedar Senghor, Sembene Ousmane, Tchicaya G. U Tam'si, Camara Laye, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Birago Diop, Lamine Diakhate, Ezekiel Mphahlele. The participants in Freetown were: William Contort, Dennis Duerden, Kofi Awoonor, Camara Laye, Eldred Jones, Davidson Nicol, Ezekiel Mphahlele, D. I. Nwoga, David Rubadiri. The Dakar Conference established four commissions: University research in African Literature; Bibliographies; Teaching programmes and lists of recommended texts; Manuals for use in schools. The Freetown Conference passed several resolutions, among which these were prominent: that African Literature be included in Literature Syllabuses in all African universities; that an Association for African Literature in English be established; that African Literature be coherently defined; that a complete bibliography of African Literature be constructed. At the end of the last of these conferences, as indicated,

⁴⁷Gerald Moore (ed.), *African Literature And the Universities*, Ibadan University Press, 1965. For inexplicable reasons Gerald Moore did not include in the anthology Mphahlele essay delivered at the Dakar Conference. It is a blistering critique of the historical limitations of the Negritude poetics and its irrelevance to English speaking Africa. Moore might have thought it politically unwise to include it. It says much for Mphahlele's intellectual honesty that he made this critique in Dakar in front of the Negritude Lion Leopold Sedar Senghor. It may be because of this that Senghor developed a warm and undying respect for Mphahlele. This important essay by Mphahlele can be found elsewhere: "Negritude --- A Phase", *The New African*, June 8, 1963. There is persistent myth in African literary history that Mphahlele was a sworn irrational enemy of the Negritude Movement. This is contradicted by the fact that as part of the triumvirate editorial board of *Black Orpheus*, Mphahlele made accessible to English speaking Africa by publishing in the cultural review the translations of Aime Cesaire, Senghor, Leon Damas and others. Secondly, Mphahlele published a positive short piece on Negritude poetry: "... Away Into Ancestral Fields?", *Fighting Talk*, February 1960.

Mphahlele resigned his position in Paris and took a teaching post at the University of Nairobi: that is shifting from a theoretical to a practical plane in order to assist in realizing in concrete actuality the implementation of the organizational structures which would make possible the resolving of intractable problems hindering the development of African Literature. It is important to emphasize that Mphahlele had first hand knowledge of many of these problems through his extensive travellings in many of Africa. One essay, "Ghana: On the Culture Front". one of the few he wrote at this time, indicate the extensiveness of this knowledge." In part the essay is an intellectual portrait of Efua Sutherland, arguably the first modern African female novelist: ⁴⁸ I told her I would be deeply sorry if she did not continue to write poetry. When she stopped writing, poetry died in Ghana, just as it was born when she began. There is intense individuality in this woman's poetry, and yet it is never unintelligible in the way modern English poetry has become these days... Ghana, to the best of my knowledge, is the only African country south of the Sahara where all cultural activity is centralised and is carried on under the direct control and material support of the government." The essay is a fine adulative appraisal of the cultural achievements of Ghana since 1957 under Kwame Nkrumah, yet indicating the shortcomings affecting Africa as a whole.

Simultaneously as these conferences, Mphahlele attended another historic event: the First International Congress of Africanists in Accra from December 11th to the 18th, 1962. Mphahlele captured this momentous occasion in an essay: "The First Congress of Africanists."⁴⁹ The attendees were truly stellar: W. E. B. Du Bois, Kwame Nkrumah, Melville Herskovits, Alioune Diop, Georges Balandier, Aime Cesaire, Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Z. K. Matthews, A. C. Jordan and others. The Constitution of the First Congress specified these aims: developing international co-operation in African Studies by means of periodic sessions, publications and research; coordination of research in African Studies on an international basis; establishing cooperation with other organizations whose interests are similar to those of African Studies;

⁴⁸ Zeke Mphahlele, "Ghana: On the Culture Front", *Fighting Talk*, October 1962.

⁴⁹ Zeke Mphahlele, "The First Congress Of Africanists", *Fighting Talk*, January 1963.

encouraging a historical consciousness on the part of Africans about their own societies. Mphahlele states that at the Congress a Permanent Council was established formed by one member from each of the African countries which were present. They were expected to encourage the development of African studies in their particular country. A Bureau was set up as well as the election of the President and the Secretary-General of the international organization of Africanists. Mphahlele complained of the absence of African American Africanists from the First Congress, in all probability excluded through the apartheid practices of the African Studies Association of America. The presentations seem to have been all around outstanding, if one can judge from a selective reading of some of them. Mphahlele made a presentation entitled "African Literature" which was a synthesizing of the multifarious perspectives on this topic which had been set forth in the three Conferences he had attended that year.⁵⁰ The essay begins by making reference to the Kampala Conference by outlining what its intended mission was. Mphahlele sought to locate the proper historical position of African Literature in African Studies by examining the complexity of its form, structure and tone. Positing belongingness, identification as essential qualities of African Literature articulated thematically and stylistically, Mphahlele offers a detailed reading of Richard Rive (South Africa) in relation to Abioseh Nicol (Sierra Leone), Chinua Achebe (Nigeria) in relation to Alex La Guma (South Africa), John Pepper Clark (Nigeria) in relation to Leopold Sedar Senghor (Senegal), to indicate the vastly complex structure form. This differentiation is held together in unity by particular mode of African social realism, perspective and Africanness, which in other contexts would be known as African personality. Aware that the writers he had considered were African writers writing in the European languages (English and French), Mphahlele considers the major African writers in African languages in Southern Africa (Thomas Mofolo, A. C. Jordan, Benedict Vilakazi, B. M. Khaketla). The 'vernacular' writers are

⁵⁰ Ezekiel Mphahlele, "African Literature", *The Proceedings of the First International Congress of Africanists*, (Eds.) Lalage Brown and Michael Crowder, Longmans, London, 1964. The importance is indicated by the fact that it appeared elsewhere in a slightly modified form: "The Language of African Literature", *Africa: A Handbook to the Continent*, (ed.) Colin Legum, Fredrick A. Praeger, New York, 1966.

mentioned with aim of showing the complex manifold of African Literature.⁵¹ He also mentions white South African writers. It would seem that Mphahlele central aim with this superb yet skewered essay was to interpose African Literature within world literature: "I have gone this far in order to show that African literature should be treated as part of world literature, and not as something specially African; that there is in reality only good and bad and mediocre writing, whether African, Chinese, Mexican and so on; that there is a real danger in looking at African writing merely as the sociologist's gold mine." This historical insertion and location could only be achieved if African Literature reflected and represented its own modernity as well as by complexifying its form.

By taking a position in the English Department at the University of Nairobi in 1963, this enabled Mphahlele to contribute to the making of modern Kenyan national literature. Nearly three decades after the fact, Ngugi wa Thiong'o was to thank his cultural efforts with these words: "Ezekiel Mphahlele from South Africa, who was there before me, had fought hard to have some African texts introduced into the syllabus."⁵² Ngugi was alluding to the fact that in 1968, two years after Mphahlele left for United States, he and his African colleagues in the English Department published a manifesto calling for its dissolution or abolition, replaced by a Literature Department at whose center would be oral

⁵¹ In a real sense Mphahlele has never cared for African Literature in the African Languages. Despite the many gestures one finds in his critical writings towards for example Thomas Mofolo or A. C. Jordan, the underlying current is hostility. A simple proof of this is the total absence in his voluminous writings of a single consideration of a major African 'vernacular' writer. Even when an opportunity availed itself, being invited to make a presentation in the Solomon T. Plaatje lecture series at the University of Bophuthatswana, a great writer who would have given him ample space for his critical powers, Mphahlele skids over the issue by not considering even a single creative work of compatriot, a compatriot in more than the usual sense. It would have been a revelation for him to have considered his New African intellectual predecessor's *Mhudi* in relation to the unfolding of South African modernity. This hostility is made all the more evident by the recent reprinting in an anniversary issue of the American continuation of the *Transition* magazine of the Obi Wali controversy which broke out at the Conference of African Writers of English Expression in Kampala in 1962. The materials are reprinted from the Uganda *Transition* ("Polemics": 'The Dead End of African Literature', vol. 13 no. 11, November 1963). The controversy is around the historically correct position of Obi Wali that African Literature can only be constituted by literature in the African languages. Mphahlele was among those who were virulently hostile to this idea. Ngugi who was equally hostile then, has over the last two decades shifted to embracing this position because of his anti-imperialistic perspective.

⁵² Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*, Heinemann, Portsmouth, 1993, p. 8.

and African Literatures and the black diasporan literatures. Even presently from exile at New York University Ngugi is pursuing this effort through his Kikuyu journal. A Kenyan scholar, whose very essay shows the deep imprint of Mphahlele on it, writes: "Even in talking about the cultural import of Pan-Africanism, one is led to ask what uniform culture should be exhibited in Africa vis-a-vis the present-day socio-economic and political problems ... The advice to the writers by Mphahlele is to keep to realism ... He shares with Taban lo Liyong the view that the literature of traditionalism is a literature of weakness ... Realism goes deeper than the mere details of the present. But while the African writer employs traditionalism he must remain sober against romanticising the past." These accolades to Mphahlele are because one of his singular achievements in the three years teaching at the University of Nairobi was the founding of Chemchemi Creative Centre, a conduit through which prominent young modern writers and artists on the make passed through its workshops, forums and creative networks. The Chemchemi Centre concerned itself with four cultural fields: Art, Music, Theatre and Creative Writing. It also published a monthly, *Chemchemi News*, which became a forum for creative writers and intellectuals. Undoubtedly, the Chemchemi Creative Centre had a profound impact on the development of modern Kenyan culture, particularly literary culture. Because of its achievement, it is important to hear what Mphahlele hoped to attain: "The basis of all we try to do is the African experience. We hope to search for the broken threads of traditional idioms of culture, and to exploit the continuity that still exists in rural communities. We try to look for points of harmony between tribal modes or to reconcile them; to help the writer, the artist, the musician -- and the non-artistic intellectual -- to negotiate the tricky bend which lies between their basic African -ness and outside cultures, to help them contain the shock that they experience in confrontation with other cultures that have different sets of values from theirs. Chemchemi also remembers that a tradition that stays put like a monument to the past, that cannot be shifted and made to bear on present-day problems, remains mere history. In short, Chemchemi tries to create the necessary climate for an integrated personality. Is this indeed not the ultimate end of the

arts? We rely mostly on writers, artists, sensitive people in any nation ... A cultural centre must also regard itself as an adult education centre." Mphahlele intended Chemchemi Creative Centre to be a cultural bridge between tradition and modernity as well as the entrance port of cosmopolitanism in Kenya. In this, he was spreading and continuing the cultural project of the New African Movement in other parts of Africa. regard itself as an adult education centre."⁵³ Mphahlele intended the Chemchemi Creative Centre to be a cultural bridge between tradition and modernity as well as the entrance port of cosmopolitanism in Kenya. In this, he was spreading and continuing the cultural project of the New African Movement in other parts of Africa.

Although Mphahlele's monumental undertaking of forging modern cultural structures and process in different African nation-states was endorsed and appreciated by the young intelligentsia in each of the respective countries in which he resided, the ruling classes and the national bourgeoisie were at best largely indifferent, and at times even hostile. Mphahlele's exile experience in Africa was most fruitful and happiest in Nigeria, where at least in the few years after independence there was not a glaring disparity between the historical vision of the intelligentsia and the national bourgeoisie. In Kenya and Zambia, where Mphahlele subsequently resided and attempted to realize the cultural vision of the New Africa Movement, there was no such modicum of unity between intellectual culture and political culture. This explains the crisis he encountered in both countries which in each instance led to his retreating to United States. Given his profound historical sense, Mphahlele could not possibly be happy residing in United States because the intellectual connection between Negro modernity and New African modernity had already historically exhausted. This was the past history of the New African Movement. Its new and beginning history would be its participation in the politics of decolonization through the construction of modern African national

⁵³Ezekiel Mphahlele, "Chemchemi Creative Centre, Nairobi", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 3 no. 1, May 1965. He wrote about the Centre in two other forums: "Chemchemi: Rediscovery of the African Culture", *African and the World*, November 1964; "A New Cultural Centre", *Kenya Educational Journal*, vol. 2 no. 2, 1964.

literatures. The moribund nationalistic politics (neo-colonial cultural politics) in some African countries proved to be an obstacle to his most cherished realization. At most in United States he acted as a symbolic link between the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. His real historical mission was in independent Africa, not in United States or in Europe. If independent Africa rejected him, or in his perception having perceived that, then he would have to return to apartheid South Africa to logically complete the last stages of the mission of the New African Movement. Those who criticized and violently attacked Mphahlele for returning home (heimat) from self-imposed exile in 1977, were not students of African history but rather of their own delusions.⁵⁴ To have rejected Ezekiel Mphahlele for his prescient historic action would not only have meant a rejection of the history of South African exile experience, but also tragically, a rejection of the legacy of the New African Movement. It is this monumental implication that Lewis Nkosi fails to register in his recent attack on Ezekiel Mphahlele.⁵⁵ It is very ironic that Lewis Nkosi, himself one of the last few surviving members of the New African Movement, fails to recognize the full historical implications of his gesture. Ezekiel Mphahlele is the very embodiment of the modernity of the New African Movement.

⁵⁴ Ntongela Masilela, "A Review of Es'kia Mphahlele's Poetry and Humanism: Oral Beginnings", *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 19 no. 1, Spring 1988.

⁵⁵ Lewis Nkosi, "Es'kia Mphahlele at 70", *Southern African Review of Books*, February/May 1990.