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Nkomo, Nkululeko; Nkomo, Sibusiso

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Melancholy as Witness and Active Black Citizenry in the Writing of A.S. Vil-Nkomo

*Nkululeko Nkomo & Sibusiso Nkomo**

Abstract: »*Melancholie als Zeuge und das aktive schwarze Bürgertum in den Schriften von A.S. Vil-Nkomo*«. This article highlights the importance of viewing an author's body of work through an emotive lens as a sociological source of archives from which we can extract a biographical life story. It accomplishes this by citing examples from two of our late grandfather A.S. Vil-Nkomo's short stories that were published in the 1930s and by utilising biographical and historical analyses. Both stories used melancholy as a literary method to underscore the sombre circumstances of black suffering, errantry, and death. By highlighting the ungrievable social, psychical, and material consequences of racial tyranny and injustice, they are rendered visible. We can see how the loss of selves, including selves rooted in ancestral histories, selves anchored in their families and communities, and ideal selves capable of realizing their full potential to be, surfaced a type of affective community with shared grief and marked a social landscape where it is difficult for someone who is black to find a place. The stories also convey the urgency of changing this status quo. A.S. Vil-Nkomo used a form of self-writing in a country where the oppressed black majority was denied a voice in order to inspire an active black citizenry driven by the desire to create new selves and societies free of racial segregation.

Keywords: Identity, extended family, discrimination, ukuzilanda, biographical research, colonialism.

1. Introduction

“Sir - Under the headlines, ‘Native School Children Four Years Behind Whites’ Dr M. Lawrence Fick, psychologist in the Union Bureau of Education and Social Research, reveals a striking contrast of intelligence tests in his booklet,

* Nkululeko Nkomo, Department of Psychology, School of Human and Community Development, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa; Nkululeko.Nkomo@wits.ac.za. ORCID iD: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7516-8145>.
Sibusiso Nkomo, Archive and Public Culture Research Initiative, Department of Historical Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Cape Town, South Africa; nkmsib003@myuct.ac.za. ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8287-7890>.

entitled, 'The Educability of the South African Native' [...] I do feel, as some of us have felt in the past, that those tests are not correctly conducted [...]. Let us change the picture: give a test to European children from, say, a Johannesburg private school and place the test, say, in the heart of Basutoland. Take children from Sehonghong, then make deductions on the basis of that environment. You would then find the Basuto child to be more intelligent than the Parktown child [...]. It would seem, therefore, that the possible reasons for the superiority of European children over natives is again due to nothing but environment, opportunity, and early contact with factors which make for intelligence, and last, but by no means least, to finance [...]" (A.S. Vil-Nkomo, 14 June 1939, *Rand Daily Mail*).

The gist of the argument in the above comment by Abraham Stephen Vil-Nkomo is that intelligence tests discriminate against the South African native by overlooking the factors that determine outcomes, such as environment, early preparation, and exposure to opportunities for optimal learning. For him, context, not race, mediates intelligence. The likelihood of his opinion being well received was very slim, given that for a majority of white South Africans, their perspective on race was still largely informed by what have been called the "myths of racial science" (Posel 2001, 2005, 2009), or scientific racism (Klausen 2009). There is an underlying tone of deference at the beginning of his commentary, contrary to the self-assurance at the end, a difference in tone that might have been his way of signalling that he is no expert in the subject, but as a reader of the English newspaper *The Rand Daily Mail*, he can still comment.

The newspaper probably published the results of Dr Fick's booklet, *The Educability of the South African Native*, in a previous issue. Vil-Nkomo was moved to register his disagreement, and perhaps also to make the newspaper aware of how this argument is being received by its black readership (Cowling 2014; Erlank 2019; Switzer 1988). Part of the task he sets himself is to subvert uncritical understandings and engagements of pseudo-scientific research by presenting the readers with contrary illustrations and scenarios that simultaneously plea for vigilance and suggest conducting future research with care and responsibility for those who will be affected by it. Moreover, he daringly shines a spotlight on white racial identity and racial privilege. The newspaper would have catered for a mainly white liberal readership around this period of its existence. In follow-up editions of the newspaper, Vil-Nkomo's comments came in for lambasting, with some white readers saying he had no place to comment and did not know what he was talking about. These ripostes demonstrated exactly the issue Vil-Nkomo was tackling. White dominance mattered more than rational argument in a white liberal newspaper, even though it provided a space for black people to write in.

A.S. Vil-Nkomo, or as he was affectionately known, Vil, was our grandfather, but we never met him. He died in August 1976, the tumultuous year of

the student-led Soweto uprisings against Bantu education, the apartheid education system that enforced unequal and racially separate educational facilities and resources. When a family member emailed us a copy of this newspaper piece, she encouraged us to draw inspiration from it in the different ways we might do as siblings with varying interests, career goals, and life paths, in our case as academics with an interest in black intellectual historical biographies. No one included in the email said anything or replied at the time, although for both of us the timing was right. Our exploration of Vil's life story began a year or so before we received the email, with only the narrative accounts of other family members at family gatherings.

Initially, our interest was triggered by his unusual last name, Vil-Nkomo. Only one living family member still uses it. We were told by various family members that he lost both his parents at a very young age. Vil apparently decided to change his last name to Viljoen Nkomo in the 1920s, shortening it to Vil-Nkomo, to honour his maternal grandmother and mother, both of whom he lost within the same year. Viljoen was his grandmother's married name. The two women were classified as "native," "coloured," or of mixed lineage, as was Vil too at his birth, but it was changed to "Bantu" and black in his middle and later years. This intrigued us. We wanted to know what brought this on and resolved to investigate further. We were also told that Vil loved and enjoyed writing. This, too, piqued our interest. Barely any evidence existed of this at the time. The email was certainly invigorating for us, and we have gathered more of his published and unpublished work since then.

To us, Vil was not an intellectual, but an ordinary South African with an intellectual sensibility. The above quote marks this convergence between the ordinary and intellectualism, his lay and yet intellectually astute opinion being pitted against the co-opting of social scientific research into racist forms of domination. There are several examples of science being enlisted to support pre-apartheid and apartheid racial policies in the 1930s and 1940s (Butchart 1995; Gillespie 2011; Bowman, Siemers, and Whitehead 2019). These initiatives did an enormous amount of work in contributing to radically altering the political and social landscape of the country, aligning some with rights, certain liberties and resources that were denied to others on the basis of the latter's supposed race. They also conveyed the message that equality can never be a reality. Vil thus employed writing as a means of resistance to racial injustice and domination, as evidenced by the fact that he warned newspaper readers about the potential dangers of Fick's research and prompted them to (re)examine their prevailing social value systems and their denial of black humanity.

This article therefore examines Vil's work of witnessing, resisting, and exerting agency through storytelling and writing and using biography. We track this through his work in detail with regard to the segregationist policies of the

South African government in the 1930s, prior to the establishment of official apartheid in 1948.

The article begins with a discussion of the connection between Vil's writings and his life narrative. We contend that Vil was able to observe others' suffering because of his own suffering in the sense of offering testimony, in addition to bearing witness, borrowing here Oliver's (2015) dual meaning of witness. Vil's writings appear to us to demonstrate dissatisfaction with the status quo and a tacit desire to challenge it. As a result, they can be categorized as belonging to the tradition of what Said (1993, 252) refers to as resistance literature, which aims to "reconstitute a shattered community, to save and restore the sense and fact of community against all pressures of the colonial system." Since it involves a variety of sociological concerns, such as power and control, inequality and diversity, and social context and interaction, resistance is often considered a purely sociological term (Hollander and Einwohner 2004).

According to Morgan (2017), in settler societies like those in South Africa, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Australia, Brazil, and the United States, the right to express one's opinions typically centred around the in-group or those that the system is intended to portray and legitimize. They were free to voice their thoughts, and their opinions were safeguarded. Vil, an everyday victim of oppression, articulated and opposed what was wrong with his society, and even went so far as to write about it. This was considered intransigence and a challenge to the system. Vil's writings in this regard can therefore be viewed as an illustration of what Maier (2021) refers to as "bottom-up" citizenship. This is especially pertinent given that, at the time, black people like him were either excluded from the rights of citizenship accorded to white people at worst, or at best had those rights restricted in ways that suited the institutions or groups that were withholding them.

Next, we will look at Vil's two short stories, "A genius life destroyed in gaol" and "Mhlutshwa comes to Jo'burg," both of which appeared in the now-defunct black daily newspaper *The Bantu World* in 1932 and 1933 respectively. The two short stories offer in-depth analyses of racism and race, as well as a profoundly moving reflections on their structural causes. Vil's works, however, broaden our comprehension of the structural causes of racism to encompass its affective and imaginative components. It opens our eyes to see the other and their suffering through both senses of bearing witness and witnessing as testimony. This likely explains why Butler (2004a) defined witnessing as "seeing as," as witnessing calls for accountability to and for the other, which can only be accomplished through an emotional connection. The opening extract of Vil's comment to the predominantly white *Rand Daily Mail* readership suggests that this may have been Vil's principal premise throughout the majority of his written work. His writing demonstrates a hidden

political edge that was meant to highlight the inequalities of the segregation system that was in place at the time.

Finally, we consider the reasons why we believe Vil's witnessing through his writing is not only reactive but also an innovative reaction that reveals what needs to be conquered, or how it acts as a form of resistance. This article is an attempt to add to the global sociological literature by incorporating Vil's act of writing as biographical – that is, he was a person who wrote thus as a way of manifesting or expressing his subjectivity – and, just as importantly, as being undertaken in a specific historical and political context. Other examples in the African context come from Bogner and Rosenthal's (2017) biographical research with former Ugandan rebel combatants, even though they do not utilize writing as a lens for exploring subjectivity. Vil's writing gives his biography a fascinating perspective for us.

This article also contributes to discussions on method and theory in Global Sociology by illustrating the value of an emotive lens for reading an author's body of work as an archival source from which we can derive a biographical life story (Benzecry, Deener, and Lara-Millán 2020). Vil is an example of the socially aware writer who is a byproduct of his or her biography. His social environment, especially his modest upbringing at a time of racial segregation, had an impact on him as a social actor and the perspective he brought to bear on his writing, with its focus on the effects of segregationist policies on the black working class in particular. As we will discuss next, Hertzogian proto-apartheid policies were implemented in South Africa throughout the 1930s, at a time when fascism was also on the rise in Europe (Wilkins and Strydom 1978; Giliomee 2003; Steyn 2015). The literary works of the Harlem Renaissance and global communism were gaining popularity during the same post-Great War and 1930s Great Depression periods for their more realistic treatment of racial and working-class issues (Hilliard 2006; Jarrett 2012). Vil, who was also a close observer of global affairs, would have found inspiration for his work in these events. Our view is that literary-based research incorporating biographical and historical analyses may be a fruitful and underappreciated approach to take into account and broaden the composition of historical sociological archives and thus highlight how the narratives found in archives can convey a sense of the interaction between social actors and their social contexts. Vil's life story and legacy, as told through his writings, inspire us to pursue where it leads in the effort to create new histories and sociological perspectives to counterbalance the erasures caused by colonial segregation and apartheid.

2. Putting His People and Himself in Writing

As previously stated, we do not begin by supposing that Vil's life story or biography existed in a vacuum from his writing, as if you could separate the two. Instead, we start with the messy experience of oppression, the course of life as it unfolds in this world, and how oppression touches the individuals who are subjected to it. Indeed, Vil's writing stirred up feelings, which highlighted their value in exposing social relationships and divides with structural roots. His work provoked emotions, like that of so many other South African and international writers who treat writing as a way of bearing witness and drawing attention to social injustice. The reader will be lured into the personal lives of the protagonists by the gravity of their conflicts and through a recognition of what has been lost, as is immediately obvious even from the titles of Vil's two short stories, which we evaluate in the section that follows. "A genius life destroyed in gaol" alludes to a sense of loss, while "Mhlutshwa comes to Jo'burg" also invokes melancholy, since, in the context of complete racial dominance, it refers to leaving rural or farm life in search of an illusory fantasy of freedom or advancement in the city. Vil's ability to identify with his characters through their sadness serves as a reminder that black existence during this period of South Africa's history was already marred by intertwined personal and collective sufferings. The sorrow that is most deeply personal is also the most social.

This sadness, which sheds light on the racial politics and divisions of the time, as well as Vil's hostility towards and concern for the victims of this system, does indeed reveal the dehumanizing effects of living in what Fanon (1986) refers to as "the zone of non-being," where blackness was confined and consigned to a non-entity, a less than human status in a South Africa where racial segregation was the norm. Vil's writings contain elements of "writing himself but also writing his people," to use Hamdi's (2011, 24) phrase with reference to Palestinian resistance literature, so one could argue that it actually has a witness-bearing aspect. The smallest scale and the biggest scale resound as one, in reciprocal sensitivity. To relate to oneself is to relate to everyone else at the same time. Based on the sombre tone of his writing, Vil might even be arguing that it is crucial to take into account what has happened to and is happening to people who have been denied the right to citizenship in their country of birth in order to change the political system he exposes in his writing and create an inclusive society for all South Africans.

Vil was born Abraham Stephen Nkomo at Robinson Deep Mine in Newtown, near Johannesburg city centre, on 25 September 1903, just after the end of the South African War (1899–1902). He would have experienced no less self-alienation and disorientation as he navigated the harsh realities of a disconcertingly anti-black South Africa throughout his early and adult years

because his life's trajectory and prospects were indexed to the fabricated and pernicious meanings of race established by a colonial system in South Africa in the early 20th century. Black people in South Africa faced extreme racism, exploitation, and oppression during Vil's formative years. Racial divisions impacted on people's perspectives of daily living at all levels of society. One of the earliest indicators of the bigotry Vil experienced was a sign that read "Dogs and K*****s¹ not allowed" outside Dutch Reformed churches. Schools were separated as well (Bunche 2001, 169), and in a sense, this separation is what he is remembering and what haunts him in the introduction's comment on the educational disparities it may result in and the reduction of life possibilities for those who are disadvantaged by such policies. He attended mission schools administered by the Anglican Diocese of Johannesburg, such as St. Cyprian's at the Sophiatown Mission, a branch of St. Cyprian's Kimberley-Perseverance School. The white children attended St John's College, a sibling institution run by the same missionaries from the Community of the Resurrection.

Vil came of age in South Africa under the leadership of J.B.M. Hertzog, who served as prime minister from 1924 until 1939. Posel (2001, 90) has shown in her analysis of its racial governance system that during this time, segregation was made more rigid and "the number of legislations based on racial differentiation grew rapidly." Racial laws affecting native and Coloured populations were strengthened, setting the stage for the later laws of apartheid. The pass regulations, which required black men to carry passes in cities and towns, were established by the Native Urban Areas Act of 1923. The Cape Qualified Franchise, which had been in place since 1854 in the Cape Colony and gave some Africans and Coloured people the right to vote, was abolished under the Native Representation Act (Gilliomme 2003; Seekings 2006; South African History Online 2011). Africans were given native/black-only reserves on land that had previously been recognized by the Native Land Act under the Native Trust and Land Act of 1936, which revised the Native Land Act of 1913. The Native Urban Areas Amendment Act prohibited natives and black people from purchasing land in non-black urban areas (O'Malley 2002).

Similar to the sadness we sense in the two short stories we are analysing in this article, Vil experienced a great deal of anguish in his early years due to the loss of those who were dear to him. His father, Isaac Nkomo, died of cancer in 1914. His mother, Maria Elizabeth Nkomo, and his maternal grandmother, Sarah Viljoen, passed away in quick succession in 1915, when he was

¹ Before the country's democratic transition in 1994, racist slurs were used carelessly to refer to Black people in South Africa. The elimination of hate speech, such as the term "kaffir," is one of the key objectives of the Promotion of Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, which was adopted by the South African parliament in 2000. Another euphemism for the phrase is "k***r" or "the K-word." The sign described was told to Ralph Bunche on his research trip to South Africa in 1937/1938 when he and Vil were discussing the Jim Crow situation of South Africa at the time. Vil spent much time with Bunche on the Witwatersrand as an interlocutor and fixer.

twelve years old. His maternal uncle, William Viljoen, passed away in 1918 from wounds he received while serving in the South African Native Labour Contingent during World War I. Much like the lives of his two protagonists in the two short stories, whose various life paths were formed by a sequence of the losses of loved ones, this delivered him yet another blow. He was left with his youngest brother, George Isaac, who was just seven years old at the time of their mother's passing, as well as his two older sisters, Cecilia Abelina and Sarah Jane. When both of his parents were still alive, two more siblings had already passed away. Vil and his siblings were all relocated to live with their remaining maternal aunt Annie Mokoena, who was already looking after her own five children, as well as two additional nephews of her older sister Sarah Pretorius, who passed away around 1900. The narrative arc of the two short stories is incredibly mournful, as analysis of them shows. We can assume that the stories' melancholy tones and some of their elements were inspired by real events in Vil's life, as this narrative of his formative years demonstrates.

In a condition of mourning, people certainly display their sorrow for a loss externally, according to Freud (1917). Even though individuals may perceive the world as altered, gloomy, or devastating, they can transform their sentiments of loss as long as they permit themselves to experience and process this alteration. Their suffering progressively evolves into a useful drive to replace or depart from what they perceive to be lost or even anticipate losing. After finishing school, Vil began to train in health services and eventually became the first black health inspector, focused on sanitation on the Witwatersrand, working in this field for his whole life. In addition to his work in the health services of the then Transvaal, he would write for the newspapers *Umteteleli wa Bantu* and, as we saw in the opening extract of the introduction, the *Rand Daily Mail*.

Through his father's family, the Nkomo, he was introduced to Methodist evangelicalism and non-conformism during this time. Vil was taken under the wing of the Reverend Abraham Nkomo, the minister of a church in Benoni's Eastern Native Township, and one of his relatives. Abraham was one of the family's six Methodist evangelist brothers. Isaac and Abraham Nkomo had a particularly strong relationship, which Vil and his cousin William Frederick carried over to their sons, Abraham Sokhaya Nkomo and Sibusiso Vil-Nkomo, with roots in a longer history of practice. Long-standing family relationships, the practice of the extended African family structure, and the idea of community life are at the heart of this phenomenon (Mafumbate 2019). However, the centre of these relationships has been the practice of Methodism, with a focus on education and serving society. They did not merely cling to one another. All the indications point to the strong influence of this religious background on Vil, which lends his writing a lamenting tone akin to Du Bois's (1968) incorporation of the sorrow motif of Negro spirituals in *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*.

The two short stories we are concentrating on here served as a creative outlet for Vil. They not only depict the harsh historical circumstances that shape them, but also intimately capture his desire to overcome his humble beginnings and his concern over what is lacking from the standpoint of his identification with the cause of the oppressed. South African resistance literature has a lengthy history. One of the earliest instances is Plaatje's (2007) *Native Life in South Africa* (hereinafter, *Native Life*) of 1916, which provides a history and a critique of the Native Land Act of 1913, which prohibited black South Africans from purchasing or renting land, causing severe disruption to lives, families, livelihoods, cultures, spiritualities, and futures. Peterson (2019, 354) contends that the use of a sombre motif in *Native Life* serves as a template for authors who came after Plaatje. As we will demonstrate in the analysis, Vil's work retains the melancholy motif of Plaatje's *Native Life*, as well as what Peterson (2008, 81) calls its "rhetoric of humility and disavowal," typical of the politics of petitions at the time. We interpret melancholy in Plaatje's (2007) terms as sadness and sorrow brought on by a social loss rather than a strictly individual personal loss in the two short stories we analyse here. This contrasts with Freud (1917), who saw melancholy or melancholia as an extreme and pathological form of personal mourning in which the beloved lost object, person, or ideal is never let go of, resulting in the internalization of this loss by the ego or self as a part of self-identification. In line with Cheng (1997, 2001), Winters (2016), and Eng and Han (2019), we interpret the melancholy in the stories in a way that shifts the pathologization away from the person and toward systemic racism and its social ills. As a result, when it comes to how melancholy functions as a literary device in these stories, we are more focused on how it serves to bring to light grief or sorrow as a social condition and a stand-in for the social losses associated with living under oppressive conditions. Let us turn to "A genius life destroyed in gaol."

3. Segregation's Fatal Throw of the Dice for Black Lives

There was a lot of media discussion on criminal justice and prison reform during the three decades between the 1930s and 1950s, which coincided with an increase in the number of black prisoners in urban areas (Gillespie 2011). Black press outlets were more "exposé"-focused in their reporting of the abuse of black inmates than in providing a "sustained critique," whereas the white liberal press and commentary tended to focus on making prison conditions "public and consequently into a place for political discourse" (Gillespie 2011, 500). In his work, Dubow (1995) demonstrates how these discussions were framed by larger white anxieties, particularly those concerning black urbanization and proletarianization. These discussions and disagreements are furthered by Vil's "A genius life destroyed in gaol," which in its own

special way delivers a critique of the criminal justice and prison systems. The narrative seeks to portray the suffering, social costs, and possible death that followed this rise in urban black detainees.

The emergent narrative is a compositional “being of sensation,” in the words of Deleuze and Guattari (1994), whose potential end is to ensnare the reader in the character’s entire existence and its unfathomable depths. It is a tale about falling down the rabbit hole of institutional indifference and being relegated to non-personhood or non-being. The protagonist, Jacob, is an orphan of Khoe ancestry who lost both of his parents when he was quite young. He survives from crime. Unemployed and homeless, at the age of eighteen he is arrested for breaking into one of the shops in the city and stealing goods from it. The magistrate sentences him to four years in prison. When Jacob and the other convicts are herded into prison like cattle after their sentencing, it becomes a public spectacle, with the police guards rushing and shouting at the convicts, eyes glaring at the young Jacob, whose unsuccessful appeal for clemency to the magistrate drew him much public attention.

Smacked twice by other prisoners, Jacob’s early days in prison are anything but the respite from bad company the magistrate thought he so needed or would gain from incarceration. A younger Jacob showed a lot of potential. He used to model motor cars and bicycles with pieces of paraffin tins, car tyres, and wires. If life had worked out differently for him, he would be an inventor and not a criminal.

In prison, he is left with no other choice but to join one of the prison gangs to save his life after its leader threatens to choke him to death if he does not do so. Jacob meets up with the gang members for a drink after he is released from prison. He is involved in a scuffle over a girl with one of the members of the gang he was locked up with in prison, who is eventually stabbed to death by someone else there that night who utterly despised him. Jacob is blamed for his death by other patrons, who saw him with a knife. He is later convicted of murder and sentenced to death.

When discussions and a flurry of research on the issue of the growth and treatment of black prisoners in urban areas first surfaced and gained traction in the 1930s, it appears that Vil used this narrative as a vehicle for commenting on the criminal and justice systems. Our examination of this narrative focuses on its traces of melancholy, emphasizing Vil’s use of it as a vehicle for commenting on those systems. With the help of this viewpoint, we may better understand how grief functions in this short story, how it relates to Vil’s life narrative, and most crucially, how he sees the protagonist’s situation. Vil pulls the reader to the loss of his kin, leaving a gap in his life that nothing could fill but the frantic struggle for survival, starting with the appeal Jacob addressed to the magistrate: “My worship, I have been brought up in bad company. I have no relatives, all my relatives died in 1918 of the influenza, when I was hardly a child of six years.” Apart from the offence that landed

Jacob in jail, we contend that Vil is implicated in Jacob's story. Vil is coming to the realization that his life may have taken a different course if it were not for his luck. In a similar way, the short story is a fictitious depiction of circumstances coming together to bring about an unfavourable outcome, if not disaster, for Jacob.

Vil and his siblings were fortunate to be taken in by other members of their family, but Jacob was not so lucky. Jacob emphasises the impact this absence had on his decisions in his appeal to the magistrate: "Ever since that time I have been living by false means, theft, trick card, gambling." He continues by saying not only that "I know I was doing wrong when I committed this crime but circumstances forced me to do it." It is important to note the connection between his decisions and his environment. The answer to Jacob's hypothetical decision-making problem is already known; as he says, "necessity knows no law. I was starving." He concludes his appeal to the magistrate by saying that, in order to survive, he must be someone or something other than what his deceased relatives may have desired him to be: "If God will be in your heart my baas and let me off, I shall pray to my dead relatives to look after me. I shall surely do better and live an upright life."

Jacob's mention of the interactions between the living and the dead is notable. Throughout his life, he has been under a sentence of death. Here, we can learn more about the social milieu in which Vil wrote and the hierarchies of human value at play, as well as how they were related to life chances. In the situation portrayed in this story, your probability of survival depends on whether or not you are acknowledged as a whole human being. This has a name. Patterson (1982) calls it "social death."² Jacob's story serves as a metaphor for dying to live rather than living to die, which is symbolized by an endless loop of lamenting the few options for living that were accessible to him. As Jacob prepares to go to jail, the spectre from his past appears to haunt him. He believes that returning to a spiritual connection with his departed family members will lead him back to the right path. The haunting that is at play in his plea to the magistrate and the remnants of his ancestors' existence are not the only things: the ancestral spectre is another potential helper. They can still save him from himself and who he has become after their physical demise. Even after death, his perception of them and who he believes they are to him are extremely intimately tied. He feels that through their mediation he may find atonement and salvation because they are still there, at least spiritually.

While he is in prison, one of the themes from the short story – the continuity between life and death – recurs, but this time with a starkly syncretic twist of Christian and African spirituality, giving Jacob's experience of the harsh realities of prison life a "haunted effect," as Cheng (2001) put it. The sequence

² Paterson coined the phrase to describe the nature and conditions of American slavery.

has a mournful, fatalistic, self-critical tone. This time, Jacob addresses his mother:

That night in prison, Jacob prayed to his God: “Oh Father, why hast Thou forsaken a poor orphan like me [...]. Mother, hear the prayer of a child that is left alone in this miserable world, rather take me up to my Maker. I am suffering.

The benign deity who has abdicated his or her duty is addressed in the prayer. In African cosmologies, ancestors serve as a conduit between God and the living. Hence, another appeal is also being made here: the supplicant asks to be released from his present misery by joining his mother in the afterlife. He still finds a place for her in his life despite the fact that she is no longer physically present with him. In some ways, she is an “absent presence,” to use Cheng’s (1997) terminology, yet she still has the power to influence his future. His fate is still tied to her. Jacob yearns for his mother’s assurance as he battles for a sense of security, protection, and belonging. Even if it takes dying to reunite with her in the afterlife, he longs to be back with her because he feels lost in this material world.

Jacob had little choice but to turn to any means of survival because he was reduced to servitude, denied political rights, and legally barred from realizing his potential in the racially segregated South Africa of the 1930s (Bonner, Deilius, and Posel 1994; Kynoch, 2008; Posel 2001, 2009). Being black and being denied the chance to succeed in life had already sealed his fate. In the conversation that follows with a fellow prisoner, Jacob notes this:

“Which place is this?” inquired Jacob from one of his fellow convicts. “It is an orphanage”, replied his friend. “What is an orphanage?” “Where European children who lost their parents live [...]” “But I was not brought up in a place like this!” [...] Deep down in the silence of a dark part of his body at a place called the heart he felt he was cursed because he was black. Yes, Ham was cursed amongst all nations. “He shall be a hewer of wood and a drawer of water for all the days of his life.”

The orphaned white child and the orphaned black child in this conversation illustrate the work being done by the two kinds of institutionalization described in this story: where you are placed indicates your worth or lack of it. As in Sherman’s (2021) recent argument, Vil seems to be using this conversation to illustrate the racial logic behind protecting and caring for some while exposing others to harm, neglect, and death. Jacob could be denied an orphanage’s care and security when he was growing up, sentenced to jail, and even death based on this racial logic. The conversation between Jacob and his fellow prisoner brings to mind what Fanon (1986) would refer to as the “zone of non-being” that we previously discussed, and which here is instantiated by the metaphor of orphanhood. Perhaps Jacob the orphan serves as a symbol or a stand-in for an entire community or group that, in the circumstances he

lived in, have been abandoned as a result of the state's neglect and failure to acknowledge their humanity and existence.

Vil points out the serious issue of disregarding systematic racism, which results in divergent outcomes for white and black people due to unequal access to opportunity. In doing this he questions the prevalent logical approach of reasoning about crime and punishment, which ignores or glosses over the systemic causes; that is to say, the enormous impact systemic racism and poverty have on curbing or limiting opportunities for someone like Jacob in their lives. Accomplishment in life is solely the result of chance or luck, or as Manganyi (2019, 44) put it, is "accidental rather than purely volitional" for black individuals in this social context. Vil seems to be suggesting through this narrative that Jacob's circumstances not only prevented him from reaching his full potential, but also demonstrated his lack of value in this society of domination.

In contrast to the magistrate's belief that jail would mould Jacob and provide him with the positive company he missed growing up, saying "but we have a better place for you in prison; you will be brought up in good company, the law will look after you," prison did not make things any better for him; on the contrary, it made him more hardened. Vil might be attempting to argue that the system itself was the real criminal and that those it neglected were the victims. He implies that not everyone can overcome the difficulties that he and his siblings encountered after losing both of their parents without receiving proper care and protection; as we can see with Jacob, the past can occasionally overcome the urge to move on with one's life.

Ironically, Jacob's eventual conviction and execution were a result of his prayer for mediation from his mother for his redemption and deliverance from pain. Vil evaluates Jacob's humanity in the short story according to a standard resembling Butler's (2004b) idea of "grievability." Jacob's life, which was tragically cut short by the institutionalized racism and structural violence he experienced, deserves to be mourned just like any other life. This applies to Jacob's deceased relatives as well, who passed away before they could reach their full potential and support him. You can see traces of Vil's sorrow for his deceased family members, especially for his late mother, Maria, his maternal grandmother, Sarah, as well as his ideal of freedom and humanity as he portrays Jacob's life and tragic end.

Vil engages the connection between segregationist practices and the rise in the number of Africans arrested in South Africa's urban centres, particularly in Johannesburg, in this brief narrative in order to make a subtly political critique. In the following short story, he maintains the same subtlety in his political criticism when he addresses the linked topic of African migration from the rural areas to cities in quest of better prospects that prove elusive.

4. Ukuzilanda: Discovering Oneself and One's Place in the World through One's Ancestors

"Mhlutshwa Comes to Joburg" fits under the early 20th-century stereotype of "Jim Crow comes to Johannesburg," the innocent newcomer to the city, according to Gaylard (2008). The context within which the short story was published is related to a writing competition in *The Bantu World* that was advertised in several editions in 1932. A picture of two Native/Bantu (to use the language of the time) children can be found underneath the call's title. The younger of the two brothers is the one on the left who is wearing "traditional" clothing. The younger brother puts his hand on the older sibling, who is dressed in "Western" attire and looking into the camera, but whose eyes appear to be closed.

Both are seated barefoot on little stools on a grass mat with a rural landscape behind them. The caption underneath it reads as follows:

This picture has a story to tell. Bantu readers are asked to write the story (500 words). Competition closes April 30. Prize £1.10. The winning story will be published.

The image itself is quite stylised and fits into the anthropometric-style images of Africans created by Europeans since the invention of the camera in the 19th century (Cohen 2015; Rizzo 2019). This is an example of what we would now refer to as poverty porn, which is common in the media and humanitarian organizations and takes advantage of the plight of the poor to elicit sympathy to sell newspapers or promote a cause (Kaskure and Krivorotko 2014).

The story is written in Johannesburg creole, which is a mash-up of IsiZulu, English, Afrikaans, and Sotho, bringing to the fore the speech of Africans in a settler colonial culture in which speaking English was a requirement prior to 1948. Compared to the straightforward literary analysis of Gaylard's (2008) interpretation of basic and improper English registers, it is a much more sophisticated method of capturing speech.

Through the two brothers, Vil tells a story of the serfdom of Africans on rural farms and in the urban mines of the Transvaal at the turn of the 20th century, resonating with Plaatje's (2007) account of those victims who fled from the farms to escape their servitude in the wake of the Natives Land Act of 1913. This narrative follows another aspect of Vil's life, that of his father Isaac, who was an "explosives miner" in Robinson Deep Mine in Johannesburg after working as a "farmer" in the Heidelberg area. Vil, who was born at a mine and later received a mission education, belonged to the movement to the city and joined the educated black class in the cities.

Similar to how Masola (2020) follows Noni Jabavu's life story, where we learn about her family's beginnings and modernization through mission education without losing sight of her heritage, we can pick up Vil's trajectory in

this fashion. This process of taking your ancestry with you Masola (2020) refers to as *ukuzilanda*, the act of not forgetting as a form of resistance and maintaining one's legacy. Finding meaning in your past from the perspectives of both the living world and "communing" with the ancestral world, "whose existence has consequences in the material world," is the basis of *ukuzilanda*, which is the search for oneself, who one is and will become (153). As Masola (2020) elaborates, *ukuzilanda* is "more than a physical return to home [...] it is also about connecting with [...] ancestors" (155). In IsiXhosa, *ukuzilanda* also means to describe your ancestry through laudatory poetry, to describe your origins and ancestors. Vil, in our opinion, incorporates aspects of his heritage into the brief narrative that preserves both his genealogy and his personal experiences, such as becoming an orphan, being made landless, and being multiethnic in a racist society.

In the narrative, the brothers Mhlutshwa and Sibiziwe are conversing. The older Mhlutshwa informs his younger sibling that he wants to go to the city, since there are more opportunities there. Sibiziwe enjoys the openness and clean air of the countryside. Here, we observe the contrast between the less stressful farm life and the draw of modernity and the city. The conversation below demonstrates this contradiction:

"I am tired of farm life, I am going to Johannesburg where I can gain the knowledge so essential to our race."

"Well, that may be your reason, but I, who am younger than you, fail to see the force of your argument. Are we not happy? Is the open life after all not the best for us? What is money compared with health?"

Mhlutshwa takes issue with Sibiziwe's romantic view of farm life, telling his brother that they live on a Boer³-owned farm and that they are subject to the will of the owner, Baas⁴ Barren Vermaak of Hasbroek Farm. Effectively, Mhlutshwa says they are serfs.

Then he describes how their parents were born on farms and married off by their masters, the Vermaak and Silljie (now spelt Cillie) families. Neither of the serfs had parents. Mhlutshwa's father had to pay *lobola* or brideprice to Baas Vermaak not to desert Baas Frits. Vermaak then allowed Mhlutshwa's father to leave for Frits's farm and marry.

The brothers' names, Mhlutshwa, which means the one who is hounded or feels harassed, and Sibiziwe, meaning we are called, reveal something about their situation. The former represents acceptance of the heavy burden of

³ "Boer" refers to a white Afrikaner farmer of Dutch and Huguenot extraction by descent or lineage. The word is first recorded being used as a slur by Governor Willem Adriaan Van Der Stel over a dispute with Dutch burghers in the Cape Colony. It was subsequently adopted with pride and used during the 1830s Great Trek out of the colony, with the appellation, "trekboer." In 20th-century South Africa, it had negative connotations within the "non-white" communities.

⁴ The term "Baas" is used particularly by non-whites when addressing or talking about Europeans in positions of authority. Although Vil seems to use it in the story disparagingly, it can also imply deference.

life's responsibilities, while the latter represents the idea of worrying less and concentrating on what is more idyllic.

What is more, we get the impression that their father gave them these names to illustrate his own predicament. As a serf he was subjected to harassment at Baas Vermaak's farm, and later he was called to Baas Frits's farm because he wanted to marry. When Sibiziwe was six months old, their father passed away, according to Mhlutshwa. The Fritzes claim that this ultimately caused their mother to pass away within a year from "malarial influenza," or heartache in Mhlutshwa's opinion. This brings to mind how Vil's parents passed away a year apart, as previously mentioned. It also illustrates how Vil and his younger brother, George Isaac Nkomo, formed a deep bond over their shared sorrow as orphans. In comparison to Vil, George Isaac remembered very little about his parents, and it is possible that he relied on his older siblings for memory and information. He might have had a more romanticized viewpoint than his older siblings, who watched their father suffer and pass away from cancer and their mother fail to move on and die in an accident, possibly with suicidal intentions, according to family rumours (National Archives and Records 1916).

We were orphans, and other people's hedgehogs. Dorkie in the meantime had been responsible for our growth. I have been working all these years as a *stuur kaffir* (messenger and *schaap wachter* or shepherd), with no pay. I am thrashed abundantly. I was happy before, but not now. Sometimes, when I pass through town, I see other Native children attend school and church, and above all I see them dressed like Baas Frits' children. You and I have no hope of ever enjoying those privileges. Look at me, see how I am dressed. Look at yourself! Hardly a shirt on! Doesn't it seem unfair? It's a shame. Why has this white man's God been so unkind to us?

In the passage above, Mhlutshwa alludes to the status of a serf, with few rights, beholden to the whims of his master, and conscious of the injustice of the circumstances. We also have Vil's attraction to mission school as a tool for his improvement, which he accessed through his uncle, Revd Abraham Nkomo of Benoni, and which changed his life and propelled him toward opportunities he would not have had if his family had continued farming in Heidelberg or working down the mines on the Witwatersrand.

The narrative comes to a close with the revelation that Baas Frits sold the farm because he could no longer afford to run it and was deeply in debt. Baas Clein, the new owner, was also a particularly vicious person who was infamous for shooting his farmworkers. Mhlutshwa wants to flee because of this in order to end his oppression. On the other hand, Sibiziwe tells his brother that there are starving and impoverished people in Johannesburg, and that things on the other side might not be much better. Once more, we are given an indication of the types of employment an urban native would have had access to and the poor conditions of the time when labouring as miners, another form of serfdom.

5. The Creative and Critical Potential of Biography

Vil's life story is not that of a person who overcomes all challenges, rises above his circumstances, and establishes himself as a role model for success. Given that systemic racism and oppression significantly harmed his life, the lives of his siblings, and the life chances of black people at the time, the situation is more complicated than that. There were extreme and nearly insurmountable restrictions on many people's capacity for self-determination. Vil's two short stories document this oppression. Furthermore, they are tales with many components that resonate with his biography, as we have already attempted to argue.

In fact, comprehending the perspective that inspires his writing, notably the frequent use of grief as a motif in the short stories, depends critically on understanding his past. According to Peterson (2019, 353), who put it very well, the motif of grief serves to "surface and give expression to suppressed ontologies, epistemologies and lived experiences that are important to the articulation of counter-archives, discourses, and memories of loss as well as imagining possible emancipatory futures." In Jacob's tale, it serves as a form of defiance against the politics of (mis)recognition that are shown in 1930s discourses on crime and urbanization (Dubow 1995; Kynoch 2008; Gillespie 2011). Vil also utilizes mourning in this tale to show how, in Jacob's perspective and comprehension of his situation, the world of the living and the realm of the ancestors are interwoven. He himself might have needed this point of view to give him a sense of continuity with his ancestry in his own life, which is why he chose to tell it through Jacob's story.

The story of Mhlutshwa serves as a fine example of how Masola (2020) employs the notion of *ukuzilanda* – or recovering one's sense of one's self, history, ancestry, and value in the world. Vil's family history of rural farming and Mhlutshwa's tale share certain similarities. The story is about regaining this heritage. Success and education were also valued in Vil's world and home. Vil desired recognition within the existing colonial hierarchy, but he was also aware that, without acknowledging his humanity, recognition was not possible. The story of Mhlutshwa and his younger brother, Sibiziwe, therefore makes references to the contrast between rupture and desire, the seduction of modernity and the steadiness of tradition. Vil most likely struggled with this in the same way that many black people did at the time, who were caught between two conflicting definitions of who they were in a society that excluded and oppressed them because of their race.

We have previously written about Vil along with colleagues who had their own mementos connected to their grandfathers (Canham et al. 2020). Our goal was to use these items to demonstrate their utility for retrieving historical information along with personal stories from the past, as well as their

capacity to generate an emotional reaction. In this article, we have made an effort to go much further than simply judging Vil's writing as an emotional object based on our unexpected discovery of it and the fact that it is a physical object we have inherited. By doing so, his writing, as Derrida (2001, 2004) and Naas (2015) would contend, becomes Vil's legacy, as well as our and future generations' inheritance. The sorrow that Vil depicts in his two short stories is ultimately a critique of the social and political situations of his era, which, in our opinion, serves as the foundation for his politics of restoring black humanity.

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Doing Global Sociology: Qualitative Methods and Biographical Becoming after the Postcolonial Critique

Introduction

Johannes Becker & Marian Burchardt

Doing Global Sociology: Qualitative Methods and Biographical Becoming after the Postcolonial Critique
- An Introduction.

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