Biko Lives!
CONTEMPORARY BLACK HISTORY

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Edited by Andile Mngxitama, Amanda Alexander, and Nigel C. Gibson
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Series Editors’ Preface

Steve Biko and the International Context
of Black Consciousness

This collection of chapters highlights the political genius and philosophical orientation of one of South Africa’s greatest fighters—and martyrs—for freedom, Steve Biko. Biko emerged as a brilliant and provocative black writer during the 1970s, at a moment when the white minority apartheid government had convinced most of the world that mass, internal opposition to the regime had been silenced. The key forces opposing apartheid, notably the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), had been brutally crushed and pushed underground, with their principal leaders imprisoned or exiled. But what the apartheid regime did not anticipate was the rise of new centers of opposition—from black churches, neighborhood centers in the townships, and school classrooms. Black schoolteachers, artists, and poets recognized that music and poetry could be effective resources for critiquing white racism, as well as affirming the integrity of African culture. These grassroots institutions gave birth to a broad, dynamic cultural and political movement by the mid-1970s called “Black Consciousness.” Through his powerful use of language and his cultural philosophy of black pride and resistance, Steve Biko became the best-known voice for Black Consciousness, and consequently, apartheid’s greatest foe.

The majority of the chapters here present a marvelous introduction to the philosophy, politics, and activism of Steve Biko, as well as mapping the broad outlines of the Black Consciousness movement of the 1970s and early 1980s. This brief preface, by contrast, seeks to explain Biko within the long memory and history of many African nationalist and black consciousness–oriented movements across the world throughout the twentieth century.

The twentieth century bore witness to the rise of a series of what Vijay Prashad has described as “Global Revolutionary Waves.” The first revolutionary wave produced the Bolshevik Revolution and established the
Soviet Union. The second wave, following the aftermath of World War II, was characterized by the achievement of independence first in India and Pakistan in 1947, anticolonial warfare in countries such as Vietnam and Algeria, the communist victory in China, and subsequently, the granting of nominal independence to countries across Africa, the Caribbean, and other regions of the third world. Sometimes lost or overlooked within this grand historical narrative is that many people of African descent, especially in colonial and semicolonial societies, did not take sides either with global Communism or with their imperialist masters.

What they sought was the realization of “self-determination,” not simply the granting of “home rule” or local political institutions that should rule them and the organization of their economies. They questioned whether Europeans or colonial whites, even those who espoused antiracist and socialistic views, could embrace the concept of black majority rule. They sometimes perceived the struggle for what Marxists termed “national-democratic revolution” in distinctly “racial” and ethnic terms, arguing that the generations of enslavement and suffering had produced among blacks a kind of consciousness of collective resistance that neither Marx nor Lenin had anticipated. One well-known example of black protest consciousness expressed as a mass movement was Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). In the turbulent period between 1919 and 1929, the UNIA established nearly two thousand branch organizations in the United States, the Caribbean, Central America and Africa, and claimed several million members and supporters. Garveyism spoke the militant language of “Race First” and “Africa for the Africans, at Home and Abroad,” rather than “workers of the world, unite.”

The majority of orthodox Marxists during the 1920s perceived Garvey’s version of black consciousness as reactionary and dangerous. Appeals to “black pride” and racial separatism had the effect of dividing working people on racial lines, making it easier for both capitalist employers and politicians to exploit both groups. Marxists opposed appeals to black solidarity in favor of building multiethnic, multiclass coalitions that drew upon the resources of a broader social base, in order to challenge a country’s ruling class. The black nationalist ideologies were derogatorily dismissed as a product of the rising black petit bourgeoisie, a fragile middle stratum especially in most African colonies that sometimes played a collaborationist role with white colonial elites.

During the military conflicts of World War II, it became crystal clear to most anticolonial black activists that the European colonial powers would be unable to reconstruct their old empires. Certain large colonial states like India clearly were destined to become independent. But for the independence process to succeed in colonial Africa, militant organizers
such as Trinidadians George Padmore and C. L. R. James believed it would require the construction of transnational networks of organizers and individual colonies, mass democratic formations that had the popular support of black working people. The Fifth Pan-African Congress, organized by Padmore in Manchester, England, in October 1945, was a pivotal event in building momentum for the construction of successful anticolonial struggles across Africa and the British West Indies. What is also crucial to keep in mind, however, is that Padmore, an ex-communist, did not perceive his black liberation project as part of any global, proletarian struggle. Indeed, Padmore’s most influential theoretical work, published during the height of the Cold War, was titled *Pan-Africanism or Communism?*

A generation later, in different regions of the African diaspora, African descendant peoples in the late 1960s through the early 1970s were launching a series of antiracist, social protest movements that were heavily influenced by both Pan-Africanist and black nationalist ideologies. This was most evident in the United States, with the striking emergence of Black Power. Black nationalist icons such as Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, and the Black Panther Party and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers advocated a militant, uncompromising politics of black identity and social protest. Elements within Black Power—leadership such as Angela Y. Davis and political prisoner George Jackson, and militant formations such as the League of Revolutionary Black Workers—were either communists, or were heavily influenced by Marxism-Leninism. The bulk of Black Power, however, was neither Marxist nor socialist. Its objective was twofold: the dismantling of white supremacy and institutions of white power; and the reconstruction of a positive black cultural identity, which was perceived as a necessary precondition to the building of a black united front capable of challenging white political and corporate elites. Many Black Powerites viewed the U.S. white working class as hopelessly reactionary. Only a politics of black consciousness could empower black people to struggle for power, in their own name.

It was inevitable that many of these same ideas about the politics of black identity, consciousness, and Pan-Africanism circulating in the United States would find a receptive home in South Africa by the early 1970s. Like Black Power in the United States, South Africa’s “Black Consciousness movement” was grounded in the belief that African-descendant peoples had to overcome the enormous psychological and cultural damage imposed on them by a succession of white racist domains, such as enslavement and colonialism. Drawing upon the writings and speeches of Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Malcolm X, advocates of Black Consciousness supported cultural and social activities that promoted a knowledge of black protest history. They actively promoted the establishment of independent,
black-owned institutions, and favored radical reforms within school curricula that nurtured a positive black identity for young people.

In 1976, African high school students in Soweto, greater Johannesburg’s largest segregated township, began a series of demonstrations against the compulsory assignment of the Afrikaans language. This issue, as well as other grievances, culminated in an unprecedented number of school strikes and street demonstrations involving tens of thousands of black children and teenagers. The proponents of Black Consciousness in the 1970s drew links between a positive African identity and solidarity. Like most of the U.S. Black Powerites, the Black Consciousness advocates rarely spoke in Marxist terms of “class struggle” and the “proletariat.” They viewed apartheid as a distinctly racial system of oppression that denied the humanity of African people. Although the defenders of Black Consciousness rarely rejected coalition work with liberal whites and other nonwhites, they emphasized the importance of capacity-building among the most oppressed sectors of black civil society. These ideas paralleled those expressed by the most progressive wing of Marcus Garvey’s movement of the 1920s, and the “African Nationalists” within the ANC a generation later.

The apartheid regime’s repression of the Black Consciousness movement, and the students’ protests of 1976–1977, was brutal and thorough. Thousands of young people were murdered, imprisoned, or in many instances simply disappeared. Steve Biko’s bold personal example inspired thousands of young African nationalists to dedicate their lives to the anti-apartheid struggles. His tragic murder by the government created a vivid symbol of black resistance that continues to inspire new black activists. This reader presents the life and thought of an extraordinary intellectual activist, who was also representative of the rich tradition of Pan-Africanist and Black Nationalist protest.

MANNING MARABLE
PENIEL JOSEPH

Note

Biko Lives

Andile Mngxitama, Amanda Alexander, and Nigel C. Gibson

This is one country where it would be possible to create a capitalist black society, if whites were intelligent, if the nationalists were intelligent. And that capitalist black society, black middle class, would be very effective... South Africa could succeed in putting across to the world a pretty convincing, integrated picture, with still 70 percent of the population being underdogs.

(Steve Biko, 1972)

Biko lives!!! Two words slashed across a ghetto wall. A phrase that haunts the nights of South Africa’s rulers. Reactionaries and opportunists of every stripe hope and pray that it will disappear under a rain of blood and the white-wash of reform. But it remains, bold and powerful; not a tired and worn out slogan but a battle cry of a generation whose hopes and aspirations are for revolution, and end to all exploitation and oppression.

(Frank Talk, Editorial Vol. 2, 1984)

Although movements are typically larger than their individual spokespersons, it is hard to imagine the Black Consciousness movement without the towering figure of Stephen Bantu Biko, who would have turned sixty in December 2007. The Black Consciousness movement breathed life into a people who had been cowered into submission by the brutality of white oppression in apartheid South Africa. By borrowing from the resistance that came before it—the anticolonial struggles on the African continent, philosophers and thinkers, and the Black power movement in the United States—Black Consciousness made resistance not only imaginable but possible. South Africa—and the course of the country’s liberation struggle—was never the same after Black Consciousness elicited the passion for a black-controlled, -defined, and -led project of liberation.
The thirtieth anniversary of Biko’s murder in police custody (on September 12, 1977) comes almost fifteen years after the formal ending of apartheid in South Africa. This fact alone raises several fundamental questions: How do we remember Biko? What contributions did the Black Consciousness movement make to the course of black liberation in South Africa and the world? How does the conception of black liberation, as enunciated by Biko and his colleagues, square against the realities of post-apartheid South Africa? In other words, are we now better able to articulate what must be done to attain black liberation in South Africa?

Indeed, Biko lives today in South Africa, but so do the material outcomes of colonialism, segregation, apartheid and—most recently—neoliberal economic policies. South Africa continues to be characterized by sharply contrasting realities. Under the terms of the negotiated settlement of the early 1990s, the African National Congress (ANC) won political—but not economic—power. Less than three percent of the country’s land has changed hands from white to black since 1994 (over 80 percent is still held by white farmers, corporations and the state); and four white-owned conglomerates continue to control 80 percent of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange. Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) schemes have created black millionaires in the thousands, making South Africa the fourth fastest growing location for millionaires, after South Korea, India, and Russia. But the vast majority of South Africans remain at the other extreme—these are the 45 percent of South Africans who are unemployed, the one in four who live in shacks located in shantytowns without running water or electricity. This is the country Biko continues to haunt, and to inspire.

* * *

Black Consciousness did not evolve fully formed out of Biko’s head. It was the product of a long process of discussion and action by a group of black students rejecting the politics of white liberalism (see Gail Gerhart’s 1972 interview with Biko in this volume). Black Consciousness developed a new conception of blackness where “Black” is constructed—in reaction to the apartheid designation of “nonwhite”—as a positive, expansive concept including those designated as Coloured, Indian, and African.

But Biko was also a unique personality: an activist, strategist, and, above all, intellectual force who developed his ideas through long debates and discussions. Books were important to him. His decision to read Fanon, Senghor, Malcolm X, James Cone, or Paulo Friere was not a passive activity but a philosophical action grounded in practical necessities. “It wasn’t a question of one thing out of a book and discovering that it’s interesting,” he says in the 1972 interview, but “also an active search for that type of book”
(our emphasis). For Biko ideas are not academic but alive and books are active repositories that are part of ongoing discussions about philosophy and strategy. Equally important were discussions with his comrades that often went on late into the night as well as listening to the “uncommon people” in the townships. It is often forgotten that he wrote his first “Frank Talk” columns based on listening and talking with people going to work on the trains. More than the “orthodox” socialist texts of the ANC and South African Communist Party (SACP), the black masses offered a concrete notion of what the future society should look like and the problems it should address. Doggedly anti-imperialist and influenced by radical humanist thinkers, Biko rejected the models espoused by the Soviet Union and China as much as he rejected U.S. imperialism. He didn’t want the future South Africa to be consumed by inter-imperialist rivalries.

Neither communist nor capitalist, Biko’s vision of the future was neither liberal nor social democratic. Yet Biko’s searing critique of white liberalism has sometimes been considered part of the liberal tradition. In other words, it has been portrayed as a critique of exclusion and a demand for full citizenship. There is some truth to this, but there is something more. Lewis Gordon argues that Biko’s project was political, not ethical, because ethics presupposes the inherent justice of the political situation (which was hardly the case under apartheid). The prize of postapartheid South Africa, he continues, has come at the cost of an aggressive liberalism where white South Africans and a small group of the black rich can benefit without shame. Instead, Biko offered an idea of “Black Communalism,” based on a nonstate concept of democracy indigenous to some parts of Africa. Contained in his conceptualization is an important critique of African nationalist politics that saw the goal as taking over the colonial state. Rather than taking over the apartheid state, Biko envisioned a fundamental decentralization of power based on the redistribution of land. Biko’s nonstate idea of “communalism,” often derided by Marxists at the time, is today mirrored in movements such as the Zapatistas in Mexico and found in current debates among activists who contest the direction of globalization.

Black communalism is an elemental aspect of Biko’s Africanity and, in contrast to those who argued that Black Consciousness was a closed world, his conceptualization of Black Consciousness philosophy was open to change and development. The goal of the South African struggle was “a more human face,” and Biko’s radical humanism expressed a vital dialectic. In “White Racism and Black Consciousness,” Biko took a quote from the conclusion of Fanon’s chapter “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness” that summed up Biko’s dialectic of self-consciousness: “As Fanon puts it, ‘the consciousness of self is not the closing of a door to communication…National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension’.”
Rather than a stage of psychological liberation, Biko considered “real needs”—the experience of “our common plight and struggle”—the challenge for Black Consciousness philosophy. At the same time he insisted that radical intellectuals not only reject the racist regime and its invention of “Bantustan” politics but play an important role by using what they have learnt in the apartheid schools and colleges against the regime itself. This of course meant a critique of “Bantu education,” “tribal homelands,” and any collaboration with the system and a liberation premised on “making it” based on the master’s values. Moreover it demanded a rethinking and “return” to the source, which included African cultural concepts and a psychological liberation from all the inferiority complexes that had been produced by the years of living in apartheid South Africa that included the idea that theory could only come out of the intellectual’s head.

Biko’s concept of black liberation anticipates the postapartheid reality of black poverty and exclusion alongside white wealth, legitimized by a black presence in government. It has often proven difficult to describe this phenomenon, especially since the 1994 “miracle” destabilized discourses and ways of seeing that were rooted in the black experience, such as BC. How do we name a social political formation that is managed by former liberation fighters, but remains in the service of the apartheid status quo? In this volume, some contributors allude to this conundrum and provide suggestions. What is clear, though, is that Biko (as his writings show, and the 1972 interview emphasizes) had come to the logical conclusion that the kind of capitalism that emerged in South Africa was fundamentally antiblack and that it could not be reformed to serve black interests.

**The Emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement**

The Black Consciousness movement emerged in the mid-1960s in the political vacuum that followed the jailing and banning of the ANC and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) leadership after the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre. BC entered a context where the most radical critique of the apartheid system had come in the form of the ANC’s 1955 Freedom Charter, which would later be adopted as the platform of the Congress movement.² Broadly social democratic, the Charter’s interpretation of the settler colony paradoxically denied the basis of a revolutionary challenge to the apartheid state. As Black Consciousness adherent Console Tleane wrote on the fiftieth anniversary of the Freedom Charter in 2005,

The most ambiguous section in the Charter is its preamble, “South Africa belongs to all who live in it.” This is not only ahistorical, it is illogical. The
very claim that the country belongs to all removes all claim to struggle itself. It is illogical to wage a struggle, call it a national liberation struggle, and yet deny or ignore the simple question about the very existence of the conquerors and the conquered, of the victors and the vanquished. The struggle in South Africa was not simply for equality between human beings. Nor was it simply, as others within our ranks want to argue, only about class. Failure on the side of certain sections of the liberation movement, especially the left, has led to a false analysis of the South African question where class has been privileged over race. It must be stated that this is an inverse of the same mistake committed by nationalists, who deny the existence of class. In the South African situation, then and now, race and class became intertwined as capitalistic development took a racial form and combined, wherein class became mediated through race.

By the mid-1960s the brutality of the apartheid state had ensured that blacks only whispered their desires to be free, but those whispers, when they came, were further hobbled by the limited discourse of liberation that was on offer. Where was the analysis that took the psychological and material bases of racialized subjugation into account?

When BC appeared on the scene it loudly proclaimed its own name in its own language and created a new Black whose raison d’etre was the audacity to be, particularly in the face of white supremacist power. For this, the apartheid state charged many BC activists under the Terrorism Act, and locked them away. But when young activists of the Black Consciousness movement entered prison on Robben Island, they confronted the old political leaders who had been sitting in jail for decades with little hope and little fire for rebellion. The new Blacks appeared like a whirlwind, confounding the old leaders. Listen to Nelson Mandela recall the shock of this defiant quest to claim one’s right to be:

These fellows refused to conform to even basic prison regulations. One day I was at head office conferring with the commanding officer. As I was walking out with the major, we came upon a young prisoner being interviewed by a prison official. The young man, who was no more than eighteen, was wearing his prison cap in the presence of senior officers, a violation of regulations. Nor did he stand up when the major entered the room, another violation. The major looked at him and said, “Please take off your cap.” The prisoner ignored him. Then in an irritated tone, the major said, “Take off your cap.” The prisoner turned and looked at the major and said, “What for?” I could hardly believe what I had just heard. It was a revolutionary question: What for? The major also seemed taken aback, but managed a reply. “It is against regulations,” he said. The young prisoner responded, “Why do you have this regulation? What is the purpose of it?” This questioning on the part of the prisoner was too much for the major,
and he stomped out of the room, saying, “Mandela, you talk to him.” But I would not intervene on his behalf, and simply bowed in the direction of the prisoner to let him know that I was on his side. This was our first exposure to the Black Consciousness Movement.4

In an interview in this volume, BC leader and former Robben Island prisoner Strini Moodley describes such acts of defiance in prison as a practice of self-actualization, and a radical refusal to be a willing accomplice in one’s own oppression. BC adherents thereby introduced a new ethic in the politics of resistance; from now onward the oppressor couldn’t be allowed to freely determine the terms of engagement.

Outside prison, the new blacks told the white liberals who had arrogated unto themselves the right to speak for blacks to shut up and listen. The emergence of BC inaugurated a major displacement of the white left from black politics. For white liberals, BC challenged their relevance and in many ways “radicalized” them in the process. In search of relevancy they went from “libs” (liberals) to “rads” (radicals), often embracing the Marxism of the new left (see Ally and Ally), with some young white radicals playing a large role in the development of the Black trade union movement. But their turn to organizing black labor represented an embrace of class analysis that proved more comfortable than dealing with issues of race head-on. From here, white activists could continue to occupy positions of influence in black politics, and to speak for blacks. As Frank B. Wilderson III argues in this volume, the white left refused to “organize in a politically masochistic manner,” as suggested by BC. They refused to go “against the concreteness of their own communities, their own families, and themselves, rather than against the abstraction of ‘the system’—the target and nomenclature preferred by the UDF [United Democratic Front].” Instead of a “political masochism,” which would have brought the white left to the brink of the “abyss of their own subjectivity,” they shifted to Marxism and black labor. The irony of it all is that they wouldn’t organize the white working class against capitalism and racism. (The investment of the white left bore fruit in the 1980s when they delivered organized black labor to the Congress movement.)

Confronted with the new blacks, apartheid went into overdrive. Those it couldn’t incarcerate had to be killed. And they were so young. Some of the leading lights of the BC movement who were cut down include Onkgopotse Abraham Tiro, who was twenty-six years old when he was killed by a letter bomb sent by the apartheid regime. Tiro had delivered a short but powerful speech at Turfloop University in 1970, which got him expelled. His expulsion led to an explosion of student activity, as one black campus after another closed down in solidarity. Black university
students began to reenter the townships, and they brought with them the new liberating ideas of BC. Tiro himself was a teacher in Soweto, playing a large role in molding the young men and women who protested against the compulsory use of Afrikaans as the medium of education in the 1976 Soweto uprising. Tsietsi Mashinini, who became a spearhead of the 1976 Soweto revolt, was taught for awhile by Tiro. Before Biko was killed in 1977, other BC militants had been murdered. Mapetla Mohapi (twenty-five years old), a close confidant of Biko, was killed in detention in 1976. Mthuli ka Shezi (twenty-nine years old) stood up against the harassment of black women by a white railway policeman and was thrown in front of an oncoming train. In her interview, Deborah Matshoba describes the sheer terror that the news of the murder of friends and comrades brought. She was in prison when she heard that Steve had been killed by his jailers: “I got scared now. If they can kill Steve, it means they are going to kill all of us who are still in prison.”

Any movement that loses its key leaders at such a high rate will face great difficulties in trying to survive. But, even as nineteen BC organizations were banned in 1977, the movement was facing attacks beyond the apartheid apparatus. From the early 1980s, the BC movement’s Azanian People’s Organization (AZAPO) and the UDF, which developed as the new movement flying the banner of the ANC and the Freedom Charter, were locked in internecine violence. This violence has not been accounted for, nor has the role played by international solidarity organizations in the weakening of the BC movement. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) did not have hearings on these atrocities. It is a well-known but unspoken fact that in places like Bekkersdaal township in the North West province and Wallmer in the Eastern Cape lie the graves of dozens if not hundreds of BC movement members who were killed because they dared to say “Biko is our father.” The turf battle between the sections of the liberation movement, particularly AZAPO and the UDF, must account for a large part of the demise of the BC movement as a serious player in the politics of South Africa. So too the role of external interests in promoting one section of the liberation movement while denigrating the other still cries out for analysis and documentation. In a 2007 interview with Amanda Alexander and Andile Mngxitama, Lybon Mabasa, former executive of the Black People’s Convention and current president of the Socialist Party of Azania, recalled the attacks on the body and soul of the Black Consciousness movement in the 1980s: “I think the 1985 Kabwe Congress of the ANC was a decisive congress. If you remember that statement: ‘The Black Consciousness movement is fast growing in the country and it has the possibility of supplanting us in the minds of the people in South Africa.’ And the last, most important, words: ‘We should not allow it.’ And from that moment we
caught hell, *absolute hell*. In Port Elizabeth, more than 100 houses of our members burnt down and a whole lot of people were killed. The Black Consciousness movement was physically forced into recess... We were being killed at a rate of three to four a week. I used to go with blankets and collect the ashes of little boys, you can only identify them with a set of teeth or with a stocking that was not burned."5

**Outline of the Volume**

What you’ll find in this volume of “conversations and contestations” is a thinker who is very much alive. His method with its “heterogeneous rhythms” makes him very much open to the here and now (see Naidoo and Veriava). As a work that seeks to critically reclaim Biko as a living thinker there are three areas of contestation that are central to this volume. First, a challenge to the increasingly standardized and orthodox history of the apartheid struggle, which includes contestations over historical memory and the activity of critical remembrance. Second, a discussion of the largely ignored consideration of Biko as a philosopher, as an original thinker. Third, there is Biko as cultural theorist and the importance of Black Consciousness to artistic productions.

**The Historic Mirror**

On the thirtieth anniversary of Biko’s murder, *Biko Lives* begins by letting Steve Biko speak for himself. Thus the volume begins with Gail Gerhart’s hitherto unpublished interview with Biko. What is clear in the interview is that by 1972, Biko had a highly sophisticated conceptualization of Black Consciousness. As well as tracing the South African Students Organization’s (SASO) background, the politics of apartheid and its opposition and its intellectual sources, Biko talks about Black Consciousness as a concrete force in the South African struggle. Five years later, after a trip to the Cape to meet with Neville Alexander, Biko was dead.

In his chapter, Alexander remarks that victorious movements attempt to represent the past as a trajectory that inexorably and uninterruptedly lead to the moment of their victory. We always face history from the present. What surprises him is the speed of the “recasting and rewriting of South Africa’s contemporary history.” Indeed, soon after Biko was murdered, BC was already becoming conceptualized by different tendencies as a “passing stage” of psychological or mental liberation that would make way for the “real” political struggle, as if BC had only been the dress rehearsal for the “real” movement. Alexander, a Marxist and not a follower of BC,
contends that “Biko died, literally, in quest of the unification of the forces of liberation in South Africa.” Indeed, at the time, Biko was looking to build a principled united front against apartheid and had arranged to meet Alexander. On the way back he was stopped by the police.

The Azanian Manifesto (included as an appendix) was one of the products of the exploration of alliances between the BC movement and underground socialist groups. Born before the creation of the UDF, the National Forum did have some success such as campaigning against the Tri-cameral Parliament before it was occluded by the more populist ANC-backed organization. By the late 1990s, Alexander notes, the National Forum had almost disappeared from the “historical canvas.” The same can be said in the shorthand history of the South African trade union movement that leaves out the work of BC activists and the importance of BC-inspired unions.

During the 1970s, but especially after Biko’s death and the creation of a new BC organization in AZAPO, BC attempted to theorize the apartheid government’s legalization of black trade unions through a conceptualization of South Africa as a “racial capitalism” with race as the determinant of the class structure. While BC as an idea became an important element of the emerging mass organizations (most of whose leaders had been products of BC) as well as among workers in the fledgling black unions, the concept of “racial capitalism” remained an intellectual conceptualization. It might have been a useful response to new left Marxism as well as to the two-stage theories of the SACP but it did little to grip the masses (see Gibson). Whereas Nurina Ally and Shireen Ally consider the importance of BC in reconfiguring the race/class problematic in South Africa, Nigel Gibson argues that the BC turn to Marxism (often a crude materialism that went by the name of Marxism) constituted a turn away from Biko’s conception of transforming South African reality.

At a time when the white liberals who had become radicals have in the postapartheid period once again become liberals, Biko’s critique of white liberals remains relevant. Just as the turn to Marxism was not coincidental, argue Ally and Ally, the turn away from Marxism in postapartheid South Africa is equally not coincidental. Especially in as much as white liberals are now very much part of the nation’s political, not only economic, decision making. By moving from apartheid to neoliberalism, postapartheid South Africa considers whiteness an economic problem only in as far as it is a barrier to black inclusion. The material legacies of racial capitalism are ultimately reduced to the liberal problem of equal access. As Lewis Gordon notes in his foreword to I Write What I Like, since white liberals are content with a system that maintains and creates the poor, liberals don’t really care about poor people. Because Biko calls for the humanity of all blacks,
his appeal to Black Consciousness is a call to get beyond such a system. Black Consciousness is thus an anathema to the BEE approach. Gordon writes, “Black liberation, the project that emerges as a consequence of Black Consciousness, calls for changing both the material conditions of poverty and the concepts by which such poverty is structured.”

The interviews with leading Black Consciousness activists Deborah Matshoba and Strini Moodley offer reflections on Biko from within the postapartheid context. Both recognized how profoundly Biko and Black Consciousness spoke to the present juncture, and Moodley offered a surprising rebuttal to those who lament BC’s disappearance from the historical record: “From my point of view it’s good BC has been written out of the struggle. Because if it was written in then we’re part of the problem. Now we’re still part of the solution.”

**Philosophic Dialogues**

Why is it that although South Africa has produced acclaimed literary, political, and religious figures it has not produced well-known African philosophers and has no philosophical tradition of note, asks Mabogo More. Philosophy is embedded in the marvelous cultural work of BC poets and novelists discussed by Mphutlane Wa Bofelo in this volume. There is a strong tradition of existentialist philosophy in these genres, writes More, but he warns against the tendency of “locking” African thinkers in the biographical moment and political activism. This happened to Steve Biko and to the Black Consciousness philosophy he developed. The first section of this volume not only rescues Biko from such reductionism but is also a lively debate about his philosophy. Philosophical influences, such as Fanon’s, Sartre’s, Jaspers’, and Friere’s, are debated (see More, Turner, Gordon) and there is discussion of existential, ontological, and epistemological issues including notions of Africana existentialism developed in Lewis Gordon’s work (see More and Wilderson).

Although it has been said that Biko did not have much access to nor read much Hegel, his understanding of dialectic is much more sophisticated than some think. In “Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity,” Biko criticizes the synthetic thinking of the liberals who search for a “synthesis” between the two extremes of apartheid and non-racialism. He writes,

> The *thesis*, the *antithesis* and the *synthesis* have been mentioned by some great philosophers as the cardinal points around which any social revolution revolves. For the *liberals*, the *thesis* is apartheid, the *anti-thesis* is non-racialism, but the *synthesis* is very feebly defined... The failure of the liberals is in fact that their antithesis is already a watered-down version of
The failure of the liberals is connected to their proximity to the system. In Biko’s refashioning, “The thesis is in fact a strong white racism and therefore, the antithesis to this must, ipso facto, be a strong solidarity amongst the blacks on whom this white racism seeks to prey.”8 Yet he also rejects Sartre’s idea that that black solidarity is a priori insufficient by itself. Indeed, rather than “class” as an external unifier, it is already embedded in the dialectic of negativity: “They tell us that the situation is a class struggle, rather than a racial one. Let them go to van Tonder in the Free State and tell him this.”9

Black Consciousness set in motion a new dialectic, argues Lou Turner, based on the truth that the only vehicles for change are those people who have lost their humanity.10 To speak of a new humanism is radical and Black Consciousness transcends the former (analytical moment) in order to achieve a new form of self-consciousness or new humanity.

And yet, Frank B. Wilderson III argues, this presence—based on absence—puts into question the very idea of liberal humanism. In a racist society human relations are unethical because the Black is positioned below humanity. To speak of a “Black Human,” Wilderson argues, is an oxymoron. Wilderson locates the source of this absence in an inability to recognize that the “register of black suffering” goes beyond the “the political subject [as] imagined to be dispossessed of citizenship and access to civil society.” It also goes beyond the SACP’s formulation, which imagines the political subject as being dispossessed of labor power. Wilderson argues that “[N]either formulation rises to the temperature of the Black’s grammar of suffering.” BC on the other hand, he argues, accessed and articulated the possibility of speaking such a grammar. Different understandings and viewpoints of Fanon’s critique of Sartre and Hegel and dialectical thought directly affect approaches to Biko. Turner notes a shortcoming in his own work, Frantz Fanon, Soweto and American Black Thought, written with John Alan in 1978. He argues that he emphasized Fanon’s “deepening of the Hegelian concept of self-consciousness” but did not fully see the duality that Fanon posits in the dialectic of Black Consciousness, namely that alongside a will to freedom is a will to power that ends up emulating the white master. Gordon, at another register, argues that because antiblack racism structures blacks outside of the dialectics of recognition, contradictions are not only of the dialectical kind.

These positions are not mutually exclusive. The point here is that they are part of a larger conversation represented in this volume in which the retrospective on Biko is a perspective on the present. If Black Consciousness...
was a new stage of cognition that became generalized in the struggles of the 1980s, why didn’t the total liberation that Biko envisioned come about? Although the movement was weakened by state terror and internecine violence, Gibson also highlights a failure of BC organizations to develop Biko’s conception of Black Consciousness as a philosophy of liberation after his death.

Certainly Biko gestured to the problematics of a postapartheid society that would produce only partial freedom. But like Fanon and Amilcar Cabral, Biko died too young and too soon to see how the new stage of revolt, that he helped bring into being, would unfold. Whereas Fanon spoke of the laziness and betrayal of the nationalist middle class and intelligentsia, Cabral advised that such a class should commit suicide. These criticisms were muted in the period of negotiation and in postapartheid South Africa choices have been reduced to the market place. This is not the kind of liberation that Biko envisioned.

Culture

Do Biko’s writings on Negritude, culture, and black communalism contain tensions and insights that have often been overlooked and might be of value to the present generation? Biko is critical of blacks who, mimicking white liberals, take an elitist attitude toward African cultures and thus fail to understand that the criticism of apartheid education coming out of rural areas is based on a fundamental truth: an elemental resistance to the destruction of African ways of life.11 In rejecting the “tribal cocoons…called ‘homelands’ [which] are nothing else but sophisticated concentration camps where black people are allowed to ‘suffer peacefully,’”12 Biko was considering the experiences of people impoverished by apartheid as the ground of Black Consciousness philosophy.

For Biko, the liberation of the poor in South Africa is grounded in African cultural concepts of collectivity and sharing that resituates the human being at the center. Andries Oliphant relates Biko’s idea of culture to Fanon and to Cabral’s notion that anticolonial struggles are “acts of culture.” Based on a number of fundamental aspects—human centeredness, intimacy, trust, cooperativeness, and sharing—Biko’s conception of African culture is essentially anticolonialist and anticapitalist. In contrast to the possessive individualism of liberal humanism, the stress of Biko’s humanism is not anti-individual but egalitarian. Like South American liberation theologians, Biko rejected the Christian homily that the poor are always among us.13 As Tinyiko Sam Maluleke notes in his chapter, Biko
was especially critical of a Christianity that played a role in the maintenance of subjugation. Dismissive of Marxism and critical of the church, Biko nevertheless acknowledged that the Christian-Marxist dialogue in South America had influenced his idea of “Black communalism.” Biko also drew BC from the black revolt in the United States but, in contrast to Mandela’s dismissive view that Black Consciousness is an American product (as Mandela quips, “in essence a rehash of Garveyism”), Biko mainly located his thinking in Africa and saw Black Consciousness as part of the post–World War II anticolonial liberation movements.

Despite the importance of BC on Southern African literature and theatre (see Bofelo), Biko’s writings on African culture are often regarded as lacking originality, yet as Prishani Naidoo and Ahmed Veriava argue, Biko’s concepts continue to take on new life. Naidoo and Veriava engage a tension between Senghor and Fanon between a Negritude centered on an African past and Fanon’s (and Césaire’s) based on a dialectic of revolt. For Biko, unlike Senghor, culture is immediately political and so rather than “returning” to an idealized precolonial culture, Biko immediately reshapes it for the present. In this, Biko is akin to Fanon, but Naidoo and Veriava point to Biko’s writings about American soul artist James Brown’s black power anthem “Say It Loud. I’m Black and I’m Proud” as going beyond Fanon’s concept of national culture by drawing from across the Black world and positing a “politics of his generation.” On Negritude, Biko agrees with Fanon up to a point, argues Wilderson, but there is a split based on whether cultural empowerment can be comprehensive and sustainable or limited and provisional. Naidoo and Veriava remind us that since “Black” in Black Consciousness was not based on pigmentation but a matter of mental attitude and style of life, “Black and Proud” is a political statement founded on defiance. The notion of Blackness articulated by Biko is very different from the concept of race employed by the current South African government, which remains entangled in apartheid and colonial racial designations and, as Gordon puts it, “lacks the political understanding of Black Consciousness that [Biko] offered.”

*Black Consciousness and Gender*

Because of its gendered language, Biko’s thought has been considered oblivious to gender politics, if not outright sexist. Barney Pityana’s statement “Black man you are on your own” is offered as proof that women were not included in the BC conception of liberation. Desiree Lewis has argued that the language of emasculation used to describe black men’s condition under apartheid meant the marginalizing of women. Pumla
Dineo Gqola has argued that BC discourse failed to recognize points of variation among blacks. She writes, “Due to its emphasis on racial solidarity as the only means towards the liberation of Black people, it promised complete freedom at the end from all oppressive forces despite its reluctance to acknowledge their existence. The experiences of gender, class, age, geographical location, and sexual orientation were not perceived as consequential enough to warrant inclusion into the discourse of the doctrine.” In addition to discursive problems, the experiences of women in BC organizations have been characterized by sexism. Akin to women’s involvement in other nationalist movements in Africa (and in South Africa), it is argued that women in the movement were regarded mainly as supporters of the struggle with more assertive women becoming “honorary men.” Perhaps the most famous woman in BC, Mamphela Ramphele, maintains that during the 1970s, the specificity of experience of sexism was utterly absent from the movement: “Women were important as wives, mothers, girlfriends and sisters, in fighting a common struggle against a common enemy.” Scant regard was given to their position as individuals in their own right. As leaders in BC, women had to face the apartheid regime and the sexism of their comrades. As Ramphele states, “I soon learnt to be aggressive toward men who undermined women, both at social and political levels…A major part of the process of being socialized into activist ranks was becoming ‘one of the boys.’”

In this volume, Oshadi Mangena and Deborah Matshoba offer a complicated and contradictory picture of gender politics in the Black Consciousness movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Their accounts and analyses add to a small but significant body of scholarship in this area, but much work certainly remains to be done. Mangena highlights the fact that Winnie Kgware was elected the first president of the Black People’s Convention when it was formed in 1972, making her the first black woman to lead a national political organization. But as we know, the presence of one person in a position of power hardly indicates the experience of a group within an organization as a whole. Matshoba also describes the objections to a proposal for a women’s organization within SASO, on the argument that the contributions of women were essential to the main body, which would suffer if drained of their inputs. Matshoba recalls, “I remember we came with a name, made a proposal. We called it WSO—Women’s Students Organization. They said down with WSO, they voted us down. And Steve blamed me and said ‘Debs, you’re coming with your YWCA mentality.’ I worked at the YWCA office which was downstairs and the SASO office was upstairs…‘You guys have to admit you are very powerful,’ that’s how Steve would put it. ‘You are very powerful.’ And we asserted ourselves in the organization.” As Matshoba explains, women asserted themselves by
smoking, wearing hot pants and heels, speaking loudly, and adopting a tough walk. Becoming “one of the boys”—asserting oneself on a patriarchal pattern and through a male gaze—was undoubtedly both liberating in some ways and profoundly restricting in others. Matshoba describes how they began to take pride in themselves as black women, but simultaneously started to look down upon other women who chose not to adopt their dress, appearance, and attitudes.

Mangena argues, however, that far from recognizing women as “honorary men,” the Black Consciousness movement leadership acknowledged that “a greater effort needed to be made to mobilize women’s active participation.” This led to the “launching of the Black Women’s Federation (BWF) in Durban in December 1975… A total of 210 women attended the launching conference. People such as Fatima Meer, Winnie Mandela, Deborah Matshoba, Nomsisi Kraai, Oshadi Phakathi, Jeanne Noel and other prominent mature women from established groups such as YWCA, Zanele and church bodies were key participants in this conference.” Mangena thus argues that Black Consciousness philosophy recognized women as equal participants and “colleagues” but not on the basis of “gender” considerations. There was a tacit recognition and acceptance of the idea, she argues, that women could be leaders in their own right.

The question of the link between women’s emancipation and human liberation was being framed and debated in anticolonial struggles and post-colonial societies the world over and the Black Consciousness movement of the 1970s and 1980s did not articulate many answers in this regard. As Mangena writes, the question continued to haunt all factions of the anti-apartheid struggle: “Does the transition to the ‘new’ South Africa warrant ‘gender’ acquiescence to patriarchal capitalism?” Biko’s philosophy would reject such an acquiescence, but in engaging with Biko’s thought in the present, it is vital to determine how it might help us understand the contours of patriarchal capitalism and sexism, and where and how it falls short.

Conclusion

At the turn of the twentieth century, Rosa Luxemburg predicted the future held either “socialism or barbarism.” Perhaps she had seen the visage of barbarism before the carnage of World War I in the slaughter of the Herero people in the Kalahari. With apartheid we faced another barbarism—the logical conclusion of European colonialism in Africa. “Hitler was not dead,” Biko said, paraphrasing Césaire, “he is likely to be found in Pretoria.” Today we face a new age of absolutes: A South Africa of abundant wealth on one side and increasing pauperization on the other. The struggle has become more complicated and Rosa Luxemburg’s slogan more appropriate. Masses
of people live in desperate conditions and do not accept these conditions. The situation cries out for the widest possible debate and rethinking. An engagement with Biko’s thought is part of this discussion.

As the frontispiece quotation shows, Biko was clear that a transformation agenda that fell short of a socialist experimentation based on not just the disabling of capitalist organization of society, but also the total rejection of the white value system upon which it is constructed would not emancipate the majority. In this conclusion, Biko’s analysis and projection is apt to a fault. For sometime now, some analysts of South Africa and BC have argued that Biko’s socialist inclination was not fully developed; some, using a single phrase or quotation out of context, have sought to project Biko as a liberal social democrat. Biko was against the social imperialism of Peking and, in particular, of Moscow, and he sought to build an indigenous anticapitalist reality for the emancipation of the black world. He clearly rejected “really existing socialism” but not a socialist path. In his refusal to provide a blueprint, Biko and his colleagues foretold a new kind of politics. “The quest of a true humanity” literally means changing the world. A new society required a profound change of value:

[I]t is not only capitalism that is involved; it is also the whole gamut of white value systems, which have been adopted as standard by South Africa, both white and black so far. And that will need attention even in a post-revolutionary society. Values relating to all the fields—education, religion, culture and so on. So your problems are not solved completely when you alter the economic pattern, to a socialist pattern. You still don’t become what you ought to be. There is a lot of dust to be swept off, you know, from the kind of slate we got from white society. (Gerhart interview, 34)

There are at least three main memories of Biko contesting in South Africa today. The first finds expression in the black business class, through its claim to be entitled to the white wealth created from the exploitation of colonialism and apartheid. The BEE program mobilizes the common historical experience of oppression and exclusion by black South Africans to carve for itself a slice in the white world. The 1994 political settlement made it possible for those blacks most prepared to occupy the position of the whites in society to do so in the name of transformation without transforming the very structures of accumulation, production, and redistribution created by colonialism and apartheid. Moeletsi Mbeki, one of the foremost postapartheid analysts, has eloquently shown that BEE was conceived by white business to legitimate itself in the postapartheid era. Apartheid started a similar program in the late 1970s and into the 1980s as a mechanism to build a buffer zone between itself and the hungry and angry oppressed black multitudes. The idea was that the black
mass movement would have to contend with a layer of blacks who had vested interests in the prevailing economic system even if they disapproved of the political arrangement. This scheme was discarded by the militant mass mobilization that swept through South Africa in the 1980s and shook the foundations of apartheid to the core.

Biko advocated the rejection of such a scheme: “We believe that we have to reject their economic system, their political system, and values that govern human relationships … We are not really fighting against the government; we are fighting the entire system”.19 Biko had foreseen that an economic model that integrates blacks into the very structures of colonialism and apartheid would create an unhealthy and self-defeating competition amongst blacks: “It is an integration in which black will compete with black, using each other as rungs up a step ladder leading them to white values. It is an integration in which the black man will have to prove himself in terms of these values before meriting acceptance and ultimate assimilation, and in which the poor will grow poorer and rich richer in a country where the poor have always been black.”20

The second contestation of Biko’s memory comes from the state-linked political and bureaucratic classes. Their ascendance into the higher echelons of the postapartheid bureaucracy has in practice also mobilized a version of Black Consciousness which on the face of it privileges blackness. The discourse of “transformation,” “representivity” and reflecting the “demographics” of society are the concepts employed in the process. However, the actual practice of power, as in the formal political system and its symbols, still employs colonial and apartheid forms. As a bureaucracy, this confronts the majority of blacks as a cold, arrogant, often violent and indifferent system. How could it be different, when democracy did not mean the establishment of new systems of relations?

The bureaucratic class at the higher levels shares a lot with the black business class. Often senior bureaucrats have left the administration for business after having laid out lucrative business possibilities from state institutions, often through privatization efforts. It must also be said that in the battle for the heart of the postapartheid bureaucracy, the black aspirant bureaucrat has not shied away from recalling the painful past of black exclusion as leverage in the battle against white position holders. But once the position is held, the behavior, vis-à-vis the black excluded, seldom changes.

In Biko’s conception of liberation, “integration” into the white value system stands opposed to genuine “black liberation.” The model of a black project promoted by the black business and political classes is integration, and in practice the experience of postapartheid has been the realization of the “integration” model that, as Biko had predicted, “…”could
succeed in putting across to the world a pretty convincing, integrated picture.” This integrated picture chimes well with the ethic of reconciliation without justice that is associated with the TRC and the postapartheid version of nonracialism. The Biko that these two main postapartheid black classes have appropriated is a Biko who is mute in the face of continued black suffering, exclusion, and humiliation.

The business and political classes have nothing to say to the multitudes who live in the shacks and the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses that have been described as dog kennels; who continue to suffer unacceptable infant mortality rates; whose hospitals are less than places of abandonment and death; who continue to die from AIDS. In a sense, Biko’s thought has been reduced to slogans on T-shirts weaned of all radical content as a philosophy of black liberation, and images of Biko have come to adorn glossy magazines and fashion houses. As Prishani Naidoo and Ahmed Veriava put it in this volume, you might find Biko’s face staring at you from a T-shirt selling for over R300. But they warn us not to be confused by

“corporate Black Consciousness” and the importance of Black pride. Biko is big in Rosebank. So big that one can’t help but be reminded of Walter Benjamin’s warning: “not even the dead will be safer if the enemy wins. And the enemy has not ceased to be victorious.”

Our struggle, Naidoo and Veriava continue, is to claim Biko against those who would “reduce his legacy to an affirmation of the political present.” Biko lives but “BC is dead”? BC is a passing stage, useful to a certain point for the rising “bourgeois” class. But thus appropriated and institutionalized, Biko is no longer a threat. This is the Biko this volume is contesting.

The third contestation of Biko is the shout of the black majority for whom the formal ending of apartheid has not yet altered circumstances in any meaningful way. This living Biko finds expression in the everyday struggles of the black masses for dignity and freedom. As Imraan Buccus writes, “Since 2004 an unprecedented wave of popular protest has ebbed and flowed across the country. A number of protesters have been killed by the police and, recently, a number of ward councillors have been killed by protesters… The Minister for Safety and Security reported that there were more than 6,000 protests in 2005 and one academic has calculated that this makes South Africa ‘the most protest-rich country in the world.’”

It is the explicit contention of editors that Biko lives in these spaces of resistance that now appear and disappear and are revived in different forms and different parts of postapartheid society. The legacy carriers of the BC philosophy are the excluded majority who continue to make life
under extreme conditions and who, as Frantz Fanon once put it, cannot conceive of life otherwise than in the form of a battle against exploitation, misery, and hunger. An array of movements and organizations are demanding a dignity and a recognition that fundamentally challenges neoliberal postapartheid South Africa. Every election cycle since the 2004 national election has seen movements across the country lift cries of “No Land! No Vote!” or “No Land! No House! No Vote!” signaling their refusal to participate in an unsatisfying “ballot box democracy.” Instead, they demand a genuine reciprocity, a different notion of politics, “a true humanity,” as Biko puts it “where power politics will have no place.”

Still, it must be noted that much of the postapartheid resistance and social movements that receive press attention is characterized by white left dominance, particularly as strategists and spokespersons. It is almost as if it were South Africa before the emergence of SASO in the late 1960s. It is this dynamic that inspired poet Vonani Bila to write in 2004, “We think the ghost of Apartheid is long dead/ Comrades, Don’t We Delude Ourselves?” The new black resistance does not yet fully speak for itself; it relies in major ways on the white left for illuminating its voice, often with the consequence that this resistance’s demands are reduced to the most basic necessities to keep body and soul together and constitute a residual insult of colonialism and apartheid. If resistance is allowed to be stopped at blacks simply gaining access to water, adequate shelter, electricity, and food (little more than the basic needs of animals), it will not succeed in countering apartheid and neoliberalism’s dehumanization of blacks. But there are sparks of hope as popular movements have begun to challenge the influence of largely white dominated NGOs, thus breaking with a form of second class participation brought about by virtue of skewed access to money and networks. If a politics that transcends the current reality is to emerge, it would in all likelihood emerge as these new movements and forms of self-activity continue to develop their own voice.

A note on why the editors’ names are not listed alphabetically: It is customary to list names alphabetically unless there is a senior or “lead” author/editor who takes precedence. We worked collectively and equally on this volume but we also understand that just as a book about Biko is political, the listing of names is political. We decided that Andile Mngxitama’s status as the sole black South African editor had to be named first. It was an important political reason to change the order. Such a move is, of course, symbolic, but it does indicate our wish to ground Biko Lives on South African soil. Finally, we dedicate this volume to the memory of Strini Moodley, who remained stubbornly unsatisfied with the postapartheid present, living Biko’s Black Consciousness until his death in 2006.