**Instructions for Discussion Post on Steve Biko, Black Consciousness poetry, week 2, Thursday April 9, midnight deadline.**

Start at the top and proceed through the sequence.

FIRST, read the Handout I’ve prepared, to give context on Black Consciousness poetry as a movement, and on Mongane Wally Serote’s poetry. It comes at the end of this set of instructions, starting on p.3.

SECOND, for broader South African oral poetry context. Watch at least one of these two videos: A young South African praise poet performer, on Sesame Street!: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnZbrJoh-QM>

1. A discussion on South African television on 'Bubula Praise Poetry' project, with performances starting at 13.25 in the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDE6ILfq-Tc>

And read these two examples of oral poetry. The first is a praise poem:

SA Oral poetry:

<https://africanpoems.net/praise/ndlela-son-of-sompisi/>

<https://africanpoems.net/protest-satire/anti-apartheid-protest-poems-part-six/>

THIRD, read the highlighted sections of the Steve Biko essay, ‘White Racism and Black consciousness’, in the Canvas files for this week.

FOURTH, read these primary texts from the Canvas files:

Mongane Wally Serote, “City Johannesburg”; “Alexandra”; “What’s in This Black Shit”

Dennis Brutus, “Nightsong: City”

On the Dennis Brutus poem: Brutus was not technically a Black Consciousness poet; he was from an earlier generation. I’ve included his poem (written in the 1960s) here, both for its similarities and contrasts with Serote’s approach to representing urban life. Note the complex rhyme scheme and stanza form of Brutus’ poem—it’s a very tight composition.

On Serote’s poem “City Johannesburg”: this is one of the most famous South African poems of any era. He draws upon the praise poem genre—he is giving the city of Johannesburg a ‘salute’, and ‘praising’ it as if it were a royal personage. Please do a little research on ‘apartheid’ as a system of spatial racial segregation, and on its ‘pass laws’ (Serote refers to being asked for his pass in this poem)—a system of police harassment, state surveillance, and labor control (black South Africans were both heavily depended upon, for their labor, and reviled for their race, made into non-citizens of the country, who needed their ‘passes’ as permits to be in the white city/country; failure to produce a pass when asked could result in violence, imprisonment, financial penalty, etc). Please also do a little research on the city of Johannesburg (the epicenter of South Africa’s gold mining industry, that underwent rapid capitalist development in the late 19th century). And on the township of Alexandra, Serote’s home, part of the aggregation of townships known as Soweto (research Soweto, too!) Across South Africa, black townships grew up around urban centers, to house the communities, which then had to commute into the white urban center to work: that’s the context for Serote’s urban poems here. So, you are looking at the center of white socio-economic power, in one poem, and at the black township space that emerged to service that center, in the other poem.

Critics differ in their interpretations of Serote’s tone and stance towards Johannesburg here; some see it as lauding the city (as is expected of a traditional praise poem), some see it as condemning the city; still others see it as ambivalent, with irony and satire involved. What do you think?

The gender imagery of “Alexandra” is rich and merits unpacking. Again, critics differ in their views of Serote’s gender politics; some see him as articulating (here and elsewhere) a problematic sexism, while others see him (here and elsewhere) as articulating a respectful affirmation of black women. What do you think?

FIFTH:

Write a discussion post, that you post, like last week, to your Small Group Discussion page. It should adhere to the specifications in the syllabus for discussion posts, ie, it contains: a minimum of 300 words; at least one quotation from every primary (literary and theoretical) text that you engage with; word count stated at the end.

I want you to explore two of these four poems (you choose which), in relation to Biko’s essay. You may use Biko’ essay to illuminate the poetry, or use the poetry to complicate or interrogate Biko’s theories, or a blend of both. You might consider how far your readings of the poetry align with, or differ from, those of the scholars I quote in the Handout, Ngwenya and Penfold. You might link back to the poetry of earlier this week, with its contrasting emphasis on rural spaces of natural environment and traditional community, as opposed to the urban modernity of these poems. You might link back to the theories of Fanon and Cabral, for comparison and contrast. You might think about: what kind of black consciousness the poetry expresses; how racialized urban life is represented (does this representation correspond with Fanon’s?), the role of orality and traditional forms (such as the praise poem) in the poetry; the representation of gender. That’s not meant to be an exhaustive list, but rather, some suggestions. Whichever you choose, please be sure to engage in some way with the literariness of the selected literary text(s), by being attentive to such features as form, style, tone, rhythm, imagery, ambiguity, metaphor, subject positioning of the narrator/speaker, implied audience.

**Handout on Black Consciousness/Soweto Poetry. 5 pages, all extracted from two scholars.**

**On Black Consciousness, from Thengani H.Ngwenya, ‘Black Consciousness Poetry: writing against Apartheid’ book chapter (in the class literary criticism folder) :**



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**From Tom Penfold article, ‘Mongane Serote: Tempering Traditions’**

Mongane Serote is arguably the poet laureate of the Black Consciousness generation. Born in Sophiatown in May 1944, his poetry was loyal to his upbringing in Johannesburg. Through an intensely urban *oeuvre* that explored tensions between African history and the English language forced upon him, Serote used his poetry to pronounce himself the ‘son of the people’, firmly wedded to the political convictions of Black Consciousness. At the same time, however, his verse was integral to shaping the ideology of Black Consciousness and its associated literary expression.

…

Serote's earlier lyrics adopted the form of overheard utterance. These lyrics described the township community from within, capturing and contemplating what is said and done, while at times attempting to recover what is lost. The notion of overheard utterance, David Attwell notes, is supported by the collection's title, which is not the sound of ‘cattle being slaughtered but of cattle watching [the other cattle's misery,] vocalising empathy and suffering’.

Overheard utterance references the rural past because of its relation to the role of *izimbongi* or praise singers, who overhear rumblings of discontent in their communities, transforming them into lyrics that speak truth to those in power. A form continually adapting to changing contexts, praise poetry is key to understanding Serote's lyrical verse … the *izimbongi* … act as spokespersons, watchers and watchdogs of the people. … The collapse of the individual into the community is shown not only through choices of imagery and the skilful deployment of references to *izibongo* and praise poems. The use of the ‘collective I’ in most of Serote's verses also announces the poet's role in the current political climate. It works, from within, to break down the western literary tendency towards the individual while simultaneously deconstructing the literary form's elitist nature. The poet thus enacts his ‘mission […] duty […] ultimate responsibility’ to articulate the collective black experience. He is not considered to be above the people he represents because of his unique skills of articulation, rather these skills are only a special function through which he must contribute to the community. This idea of community acting through the poet reflects the emphasis that Black Consciousness placed on unity. …

Mzamane cites deference and celebration as two of the most notable aspects of *izibongo*. Unsurprisingly, given the desire expressed by Black Consciousness thinkers to articulate the positive aspects of African history, deference and celebration are common features of Serote's work. … ‘City Johannesburg’ also begins with the deferential ‘this way I salute you’ (l. 1). A love poem to the urban metropolis, ‘City Johannesburg’ admits an often turbulent relationship that sometimes forces Serote to move beyond the constructions of common praise. … Because praise poems for the chief frequently enunciated loyalty to the whole tribe, Serote uses his modernised praise poetry to cast Johannesburg, in ‘City Johannesburg’ and other poems of the city, as the physical embodiment of the holistic African experience. Personification is characteristic of oral tradition – for example Zulu *izimbongi* and Xhosa *iimbongi* tended to ‘view everything, even animals and inanimate objects, in anthropogenic terms’ – and the city, for Serote, deserves the value attached to its frequent personification.

Perhaps ‘Alexandra’ is the best example, a poem that also exemplifies Serote's distaste for a romanticised past. He acknowledges a love for Alexandra's past, present and future, while depicting the township as a mother figure. Despite the hardships and limited opportunities she brings to the narrator's life – she is ‘bloody cruel’ (l. 27) and able to ‘frighten me’ (l. 25) – he cannot help but return her love unconditionally. Although not the best of maternal figures, Alexandra remains forever his mother, and Serote can identify ‘as one of its sons’. … The female personification of Alexandra highlights the debates that have surrounded Black Consciousness's gendered discourse, which have recently come in for re-examination. Black Consciousness was initially portrayed as a male-dominated construction, where ‘“Manhood” was perhaps the most basic element’.[28](https://www-tandfonline-com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/doi/full/10.1080/03057070.2015.1055547) The lack of masculine power caused by apartheid was frequently represented in Black Consciousness literature by images of castration, while male activists often sought to reaffirm their power through their relations with black women.