

Tactics of the Habitat: the Elusive Identity of Nat Nakasa

by

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DECLARATION

I, Heather Margaret Acott, declare that this is my own unaided work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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SUMMARY

In this dissertation on Nat Nakasa I argue, in Chapter 1, that he is one of South Africa's first literary flaneurs. Walking the city as an urban spectator, part journalist, part sociologist, his modernist writings of the metropolis celebrate Johannesburg and also place him in a broad international context.

His 'tactics of the habitat', in Foucault's phrase, become subversive ruses, a navigation through the cultural seam of South Africa in the 1960s, and this approach offers an alternative to a reductionist anti-apartheid critique.

Chapter 2 analyses the excavation of his memory and subsequent elevation to media icon, with the naming of the SANEF Award for Media Integrity after him. Chapter 3 discusses how his auto/biographical writings and representation of self and other contribute to 'making history's silences speak'. Finally in chapter 4, I discuss his elusive identity as part of the *Drum* generation, an insider/outsider, and his exile and suicide in America.

KEYWORDS

Nat Nakasa; flaneur; media icon; Michel de Certeau; auto/biographer; *Drum* writers; exile; tyranny of place.



Jo'burg Man, by Arlene Amaler-Raviv and Dale Yudelman

INTRODUCTION

Nat Nakasa is one of the legendary journalists who worked on *Drum* magazine in the late 1950s and early 1960s. He was appointed as the first black columnist on the *Rand Daily Mail*, and moved on to become the founding editor of *The Classic*, a non-political literary journal in which he undertook ‘to seek African writing of merit’, regardless of the race of the contributor. In 1964 he was awarded a Nieman Fellowship to study at Harvard University, but had to leave South Africa on a one-way exit permit for the United States as the government of the day refused him a passport. After a year in America, he committed suicide, possibly because of his exiled condition.

His non-racial stance, and refusal to accept the racial and spatial boundaries of that time have earned him an iconic status, with a major journalism award being named after him – the Nat Nakasa Award for Media Integrity; he has also received the State President’s Order of Ikhamanga in Silver for excellent achievement ‘in the field of arts, culture, literature, music, journalism or sport’.

Yet despite these awards, his work suffers from a benign neglect, with low sales of his collected work, *The World of Nat Nakasa*, and little academic interest in his writing. He remains an insider/outsider in South African literature, a ‘Native of Nowhere’ (the title of one of his last columns), his understated irony setting him apart from the racy style of his peers on *Drum*, his moderate views anticipating a rainbow nation inclusivity. His liberal humanism makes him heir to the legacy of Sol Plaatje, a legacy continued by contemporary columnists like Justice Malala and Jacob Dlamini.

My interest in Nakasa is in his representation of place and space, and I argue that he is one of South Africa's first literary flaneurs. As a stroller through the streets, an urban spectator, part journalist, part sociologist, his modernist writings of the metropolis celebrate Johannesburg and also place him in a broad international context. Seen from the perspective of De Certeau's practice of everyday life, Nakasa's survival strategies, his 'tactics of the habitat', in Foucault's phrase, become subversive ruses, a navigation through the cultural seam of South Africa in the 1960s, and this approach offers an alternative to a reductionist anti-apartheid critique.

The original idea for this dissertation was to encompass several South African writers and their representation of place during the official apartheid era; but I found myself drawn more and more to the writing of one man, Nat Nakasa, and in many ways it is Nakasa who found me. His work has yielded unexpected riches, particularly when viewed through the gauze template of current urban thinking, of walking the city, from the perspective of Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, and Michel de Certeau, and the presence he wrested from what for the broad populace was a dehumanizing era.

Though he is a part of the *Drum* generation, he has a different voice from the jazzy violence of their language and experience, and he is the least flamboyant of the hard-drinking, womanizing, hedonistic set dubbed the Fifties People. A modernist who believed in the progress and possibilities of the city, and particularly of Johannesburg, his ability to navigate through racial boundaries, exploring the sutures that both held together and separated the diverse groups, anticipates a time beyond apartheid. His laconic self-effacing style, his modesty, irony and dry humour, his ability to tell a tale well and briefly, combine dispassionate observation with a humane concern for individuals. These earned him a place as the first black columnist on the *Rand Daily Mail*, employed to represent both the views and conditions across the colour line.

Some of his more famous peers, Lewis Nkosi and Es'kia Mphahlele in particular, have dismissed his work and style as shallow; yet the more I read, the more depth I found in his writing, which has been subjected to very little critical examination to date. His paradoxical position as an insider/outsider epitomizes the dilemma of many moderates during the apartheid era, critical of the inherent injustices of the time yet

reluctant to be drawn into radical positions, and thus in danger of being labeled apartheid (or colonial) sell-outs. English is his preferred medium, as a global form of communication, and his identity veers between the wider world this offers and an ethnic nativism he discovered in the United States, when influenced by the ‘return to roots’ of African-American thinking.

The process of research into his work, of finding Nakasa, took me to strange places, with strange results. I had been wrestling for months with Nakasa’s enigmatic persona, as there seems to be an impenetrable barrier between the cool confidence and the optimism of his professional writing, and the deep and lonely anguish of a man who could take his own life in a foreign city. Many of his friends and former colleagues whom I planned to interview had recently died, or remembered too little to be of value; hoping to find more material than the feature articles and columns contained in the only published book of his work, *The World of Nat Nakasa* (edited by Essop Patel), I turned to the remnants of the SAAN cuttings library which were then stored at the University of the Witwatersrand. As he was a columnist for the *Rand Daily Mail* there should have been a file of his writing included in this thematic, topical, authored collection. This pursuit of the Native of Nowhere led me to a disused basement with a shady past. It was once the site of vivisection experiments, according to Michelle Pickover, the curator in charge of the SA Historical and Literary Papers housed in the William Cullen Building (part of the library of the University of the Witwatersrand), and before that, for nuclear experiments by the Department of Physics during the final stages of Second World War. Pickover is a concerned animal rights activist for whom these experiments, and this place, are anathema and she held the key, literally, to the building where the SAAN cuttings had been housed – though dumped might be a better description of this neglected collection.

(The historical background to the collection is this: that in 1985 the South African Associated Newspaper group had fallen on hard times. The group consisted of the *Sunday Times*; the *Rand Daily Mail*; the *Financial Mail*; the *Cape Times*, and the *Daily Dispatch*, and when their collective debt had spiralled downward to what was then the mammoth amount of R45 million, the company was forced to sell its building and printing presses. They moved to new offices in Diagonal Street (a diamond-

shaped building considered an acme of modernism in downtown Johannesburg), which were too small to house the substantial library of thematic cuttings, particularly as it was obvious even in the mid-1980s that the future would be electronic. This collection does not include bound copies of the full newspaper editions, which were held in several libraries, including the Johannesburg Public Library. The company retained some of the cuttings, but older material from this collection was offered to the University of the Witwatersrand, which already had documents in its archival collection from many of South Africa's liberal institutions; the South African Institute of Race Relations, the Progressive Party, and the Church of the Province of South Africa. Rumour has it that the SAAN cuttings collection had been plundered by local and foreign journalists before the move; and no documentary evidence about this donation remains in either the University, or the company that now manages what is left of the old SAAN. The company has changed its name three times, from SAAN to Times Media Ltd, then to Johnnic Communications, and most recently to Avusa. The *Rand Daily Mail* is no more, though it was partly replaced in 1986 by *Business Day*, and the *Cape Times* now belongs to rival Independent Newspapers, formerly the Argus Group.)

It was the week before Christmas 2004, and the campus was almost deserted. Carol Archibald, a librarian from the Dept of Historical and Literary papers, escorted me to the desolate two-storey building known as The Wedge, on the West Campus, where the traffic department had occupied the ground floor, and the SAAN cuttings the basement. What we found was a desolate building where the electricity had been cut off, and the ground floor covered in water. The key to the security gate leading to the basement did not work, and security guards on duty at the nearby entrance gate directed us to the Department of Paleontology and Rock Art Research. There Dr Ben Smith confirmed that the building had been stripped and gutted and in the new year would be demolished to make way for a new rock art route, subsequently to open as the Origins Centre. This would form part of Johannesburg's proposed cultural hub extending from the Constitutional Court, past the Civic Theatre, encompassing Wits, and terminating in Newtown's cultural complex.

These plans for an urban renewal based on the city's cultural life exhibited an optimism that countered the prevailing negative sentiments in Johannesburg about

crime, grime and urban degradation at a time when major corporations were relocating to the perceived security of Sandton; but there were no plans for the future of the SAAN collection. This collection had become an embarrassing problem, a forgotten and unwanted orphan. On gaining access to the basement we discovered a collection in disarray, many of the files waterlogged, their contents spewed over a damp floor, the original indexing, hierarchies and taxonomy destroyed. The remaining files, in no particular order, were moved only days before the building's demolition to relative safekeeping on the university's Education Campus (the former Johannesburg College of Education) but the collection has been seriously devalued by its chaotic condition, and any meaningful research there is unlikely.

This is a sad end to this portion of a once great newspaper library, though there is more than a little irony in the fact that Stone Age rock art has replaced mid-twentieth century technology, with all its complexity of lead and hot presses, printers and their devils. Only the new technology of scanning and digitization supported by a powerful search engine will replace this topical cuttings collection.

As for Nat Nakasa, I was directed to an archival file in the Historical and Literary Papers Collection, containing Nakasa's papers. These proved to be mainly flimsy copies from the correspondence Nakasa had conducted while editing the literary magazine, *The Classic*, correspondence which, in the twenty-first century, carries an aura of a different age, of blue carbon sheets and typewriters, and of handwritten airmail letters instead of email. Most of the correspondence consists of business letters dealing with subscriptions and contributions, though there are a few gems, like the lengthy letters from Arthur Maimane and Lewis Nkosi, and another from Nakasa about his hopes to continue studying for his matriculation examination. But apart from revealing the impressive confidence and professional competence of a young man, this quest for an authentic Nakasa was inconclusive, and little more light has been thrown on someone who seems to have kept his private life very private.

It is impossible to separate the life of Nakasa from his writing, and it is his life and particularly his death, rather than his writing, that has been subjected to most previous analysis. Singh, in the (unpaged) abstract to his 1990 dissertation, 'views his journalism as part of his (i.e. Nakasa's) own 'autobiography''. I have shifted my

focus from the circumstances of his life to an investigation of his published work (newspaper columns, feature articles, one speech and one short story), finding in them a record of that time, those places, and his survival strategies in navigating both Johannesburg and New York. The perspectives I have chosen – of Nakasa as flaneur, as media icon, and, in the many brief cameos, as biographer – are not exhaustive but, I assert, offer different perspectives of this writer, placing him in the wider international context to which he aspired.

CHAPTER ONE

AN AFRICAN FLANEUR

A whole history remains to be written of spaces – which would at the same time be the history of powers (both of these terms in the plural) from the great strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitat.

Michel Foucault, *The Eye of Power*

Nat Nakasa is often viewed as a triumph of the rational optimism of the Enlightenment, being both a hero (ignoring and surviving the restrictions of apartheid) and a victim (taking his life in despair at his exiled status); but there is another, modernist perspective of Nakasa, and that is as flaneur. The flaneur, the city stroller who looks without touching, whose level of engagement is largely visual, has been described as a phenomenon of the cities, emerging particularly in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, in the work of Charles Baudelaire, and subsequently in his twentieth-century German critic Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's work on the arcades of Paris reflects a particular time and place, as major social engineering changed the face of the French capital, yet despite its specific nature, I would assert that it is also relevant to a black writer in South Africa a hundred years later.

Nakasa arrived in Johannesburg from Durban in the late 1950s, a century after Baudelaire's Parisian perambulations. He found a mid-twentieth century city with a grid-based centre surrounded by dormitory suburbs, both the affluent like Houghton, and the working-class like Soweto; a city which was closer to other cities of the New World than to those of Europe, but also a city on the brink of a major exercise in social engineering and urban planning in the name of racial segregation. Apartheid denied Nakasa access to white suburbs, a denial he observed largely in the breach. By claiming the city and its suburbs as his own, Nakasa's peripatetic experience of his

adopted city makes him one of South Africa's first literary flaneurs, disproving Stefan Morawski (1994:181) who, in his description of flanerie, queried the existence of the flaneur outside of Europe.¹ Morawski describes the phenomenon as

due first of all to more or less definite sociological processes. The birth of the phenomenon of flanerie in our European culture (I have not heard, maybe because of ignorance, about anything similar in say Asiatic or African cultural history) confirms the assumption that it was a quite specific set of circumstances which triggered the emergence of the artist as (and) flaneur.

Nadine Gordimer (1973:29,31 and in Nicol 1991:156), David Rabkin (1975:108, 226) and Es'kia Mphahlele (1974:200) have all remarked on the urban identity of writers from the *Drum* era, who constitute the first significant literary shift by African writers away from an often idealized identity that is tribal and rural, to one representing the space and pace of the modern city. Few African urban immigrants in mid-twentieth century Johannesburg owned their own transport, so that by both choice and necessity they were either pedestrians in the streets of city and township, or used trains, buses and taxis. This street-level experience Nakasa and his fellow *Drum* writers capture, anticipating, and illustrating, contemporary concerns in urban geography, of spatial and geo-politics, and of walking the city. This urban modernity has several faces; as Bruce Mazlish (1994:48) remarks of Baudelaire:

the *flaneur* is more than a journalist, though that is how he earns his living. He is a poet, who observes daily, urban capitalist life – and writes up his observations in prose. He is the 'dandy', protesting with his sometimes feigned idleness the bourgeois work ethic and clinging to the remnants of the aristocratic aura, but now forced to go on the market. He gave classic expression to the type both in his own life and in his writings. In the process, he singularly creates the idea of modernity.

Flanerier is described as a gendered, male occupation, perhaps because nineteenth-century women indulging in similarly aimless pursuits risked being seen as prostitutes touting for business (Woolf 1994:125, 127) – a description that might well apply to women in South Africa's cities then, and now.

¹ Chris Thurman (2008) makes a similar claim for Herman Charles Bosman, in his review of 'A Touch of Madness', David Butler's one-man play on Bosman's artistic life in Johannesburg. 'Here we have Bosman the flaneur, walking idly through the streets of early 20th-century Johannesburg, observing its shifting urban geography and encountering its curious characters'.

More pertinent, for Nakasa at any rate, is David Frisby's description of flanerier as an ambiguous activity consisting of seeing, reading and writing; part observation, that is of reading the city as text, both its spatial images and human configuration; in part reading written texts, and in part producing texts (Frisby 1984:82-3). Flanerier in this literary perspective differs from the present-day French idea of window-shopping; in fact there is a notable absence of commodity fetishism amongst literary flaneurs, who glide through their urban environment leaving little or no trace, other than in writing, with even the geographical details of their routes remaining vague and unspecific. The flaneur as part detective, part sociologist, part journalist (ibid.), and subsequently, part tourist, aptly fits Nakasa's ambiguous nature as evinced in his *Rand Daily Mail* columns dealing with Johannesburg and Soweto, exploring the sutures that both joined and divided white and black communities. These columns are grouped together in *The World of Nat Nakasa* as 'Johannesburg Pieces', and 'Soweto Pieces'; and in his final columns written from the United States, 'Met with smiles and questions', and 'Mr Nakasa goes to Harlem'.

Nakasa was employed by the *Rand Daily Mail* as its first black columnist, with a brief to report on the city as he saw it. His work for *Drum* had been noticed by the then Deputy Editor of the *RDM*, Allister Sparks, who was keen to have a black voice on the paper, one that would convey to its largely white readership both the conditions and the views of black people in Johannesburg in the 1960s. In an interview with the author in July 2006, Sparks remarked on Nakasa's easy and articulate style which would be acceptable to the paper's readers; Nakasa was not expected to be an investigative journalist along the lines of Henry Nxumalo. (Nxumalo, dubbed Mr Drum, undertook dangerous undercover assignments, notably to the potato farms near Belfast, to expose the appalling conditions of farm labourers). Instead, Nakasa had a roving brief to comment on what he saw, and on the implications of what he saw; his was the role of the spectator, honouring a tradition going back to Addison and Steele. The fact that he crossed the line, in and out of white society, made him comfortable in that society, and his prose is more that of suburbia than of Sophiatown or Soweto. There is no slang or *tsotsitaal* in Nakasa's measured cadence, and it is this ambiguous identity, his refusal to be pigeon-holed, that gave him credibility among the newspaper's readers then, and has made him an icon of media freedom and integrity today. He also anticipates and charts a new, cross-cultural South African identity; and

his easy assimilation of western culture is mirrored in many of the sophisticated columnists who have succeeded him in the twenty-first century. For example, Justice Malala in his guise as a gastronomic tourist, captures a similar tone, both worldly and slightly self-deprecating, in discussing food and drink, particularly the cooking of three sisters on a remote Mediterranean island. In his column entitled 'Food for thought: Crime, seen from Sicily' (*Financial Mail*, 13 July 2007: 87), Malala writes:

I have been to the lovely, stunning island of Panarea in the Aeolian Islands...the food was brilliant... But here is a revelation. I am no fan of mutton. I find it just a little bit too strong – the smell is overpowering. You know how this is – you go to a friend's house when they are slaughtering to propitiate the ancestors and you cannot touch the meat. It's the goat. Just a tad too strong. Well, the Three Sisters put a whole load of herbs on it and it worked like a dream. Stench gone, taste galore. Anyway, I have no Italian. So all I could say to the sisters was *multo bene* and *splendido!* Come to think of it, I might have to take up Italian just so I can order properly the next time I am in that country.

It is this mixed identity, of suave cosmopolitanism together with African tradition that Nakasa initiated, accommodating different cultures in a comfortable fusion. Ironically enough, though he gave a voice in the mainstream press to the silent and oppressed majority, his style does not find favour with subsequent and more radical writers such as Mongale Wally Serote and Sandile Memele, who label him collaborationist. In this sense of appropriating the discourse of the ruling class, Nakasa exhibits characteristics of the subaltern speaking; his subaltern role is as much constitutive as it is reflective (Williams and Chrisman 1993:16). Whether he used mimicry as parody in his columns is arguable, and will be further developed in the final chapter. Nakasa's journalism has been taken at face value, as an example of the representational realism in South African writing commented on by critics such as Jack Thompson² (in his letter to Nakasa in 1963), Gordimer (1973:7), and Nkosi (1965:17). Yet the notion of the flaneur as allegorist, narrator and fabricator adds a different dimension to Nakasa's writing, acknowledging the trickster and the creative dimensions in his work that is also a testament to the ambiguity of mimesis, its

² Jack Thompson, Classic files, August 13 1963, commenting on *The Classic*:

Your fiction writers all seem to write in a direct naturalist tradition. Why? Is this choice made consciously? Are they aware that this is only one way of writing, and not a very usual one today? Your poems seem to me often to be more concerned with making a statement than with making a poem.

apparent servility concealing wry social comment. The veracity of experience and the authenticity of the 'friends' in his anecdotes include an allegorical function, illustrating the anomalies and possibilities of his situation. Instead of 'journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature' (Nkosi 1965:126), Nakasa's writing has literary elements parading as journalistic fact.

While he might not have read either Baudelaire or Walter Benjamin, Nakasa's city sketches of Johannesburg mirror their perspective of the urban voyeur, as a 'painter of the passing moment and of all the suggestions of eternity that it contains' (Mazlish 1994:49). This is not the stroller of Cape patois, who is a street-wise petty thief and vagrant; the flaneur operates on a different plane, though Marxist critic Terry Eagleton dismisses the flaneur as:

that drifting relic of a decaying petty bourgeoisie who for Benjamin bulks so large behind Baudelaire's texts... Strolling self-composedly through the city, loitering without intent, languid yet secretly vigilant, he displays in living motion something of the commodity's self-contradictory form. His solitary dispossession reflects the commodity's existence as fragment... and his meanderings are as magically free of physical traces as the commodity is absolved from the traces of its production. Yet at the same time his painstaking production of himself as 'personality', his genteel-amateur distaste for the industrial labour through which he glides, signifies the protest of a fading aura in the face of commodity production – just as the commodity itself, that glamorous, eternally self-possessed subject, offers itself as compensation for the very drab division of labour of which it is the product. Both flaneur and commodity tart themselves up in dandyish dress. The flaneur at once spiritually pre-dates commodity production – he strays through the bazaars but prices nothing – and is himself the prototypical commodity, not least because his relationship to the masses is one of simultaneous complicity and contempt. In this, indeed, the flaneur resembles the allegorist, for both dip randomly into the ruck of objects to single out for consecration certain ones that they know to be in themselves arbitrary and ephemeral. The flaneur 'becomes deeply involved with [the crowd], only to relegate them to oblivion with a single glance of contempt'. (Eagleton 1981: 25-26)

Nakasa's deft style is not contemptuous, nor is there much evidence of personal dandyism. He is both dispassionate and sympathetic; aware of city life 'as a dramatic historically concrete phenomenon' (Mazlish 1994: 44). What he shares with Baudelaire's urban and urbane man-about-town is a detached view; his attitude towards the workers and commuters of Johannesburg approximates the slightly condescending concern of the liberal intelligentsia and haute bourgeoisie who were his role models. The slight distaste he evinces for a city which by day 'became a

depressing mess', in 'Johannesburg, Johannesburg' (Nakasa 1985:5), indicates his emotional distance from the 'seething mass of workers'. When writing about the difficulties black men had in finding hostel accommodation in Johannesburg, he describes a telephone conversation with the white superintendent of the hostel, in which he 'spoke in a faked Oxford accent. "My name is Brokenshaw", I said. "Is there a vacant bed in your hostel by any chance?"' (ibid.: 4). There is a fair amount of name-dropping in his account 'When VIP weds VIP' of being the best man at a socialite wedding: 'Among the late messages came one from the Governess of Eastern Nigeria, Lady Ibiam... "This was bound to be a big wedding", an onlooker commented, "what with Edith being a B.A. and Nimrod a well-known psychologist and M.A"... The bridal party included three university graduates and Nimrod had attorney J. Cadoe Kobus from Cape Town as his chief bestman.' (ibid.: 128-9).

In Nakasa's note to Dennis Kiley (then a reporter on the *Golden City Post*), November 6, 1963, he writes:

You say you spent some time in the Congo. Aren't there any chaps writing there? We have someone here who translates from French. It would be nice to get some Congolese material. If officialdom favours me with a passport I may appear in those parts driving a jeep and wearing a bushjacket as the first black tourist, neo-colonialist, imperialist journalist. (*Classic files*)

And in a tongue-in-cheek column entitled 'The myth of the born musicians', he comments:

People say, for instance, that music was born in Africa. Others go a step further and say that Africans are born musicians. It is difficult to know just what this means. I don't see much evidence of a great tradition of worthwhile musical activity to support this myth. It is not Africa which gave us Mozart. (ibid.: 95).

These remarks are in part at least ironic; Nakasa's tribute to penny-whistler Spokes Mashiane, entitled 'The Magic Piper', demonstrates his appreciation of a unique African musical form; he is also obliquely defending Africa from the 'happy native' image of dancing buffoons. Columns like this go to the heart of the contentious debate as to whether Nakasa wrote with his own or his master's voice, and even if his fantasy about 'driving a jeep and wearing a bushjacket as the first black tourist, neo-colonialist, imperialist journalist' is not to be taken too seriously, it evinces a sense of identification with a privileged expatriate middle-class. Whether his mimicry is ironic, satirical, or envious is part of the paradox of his writing that distinguishes

Nakasa from the other *Drum* writers, and earned opprobrium from Serote and other more radical writers in subsequent decades. ‘Nat tommed’, writes Serote in his tribute to Nakasa (1985: xxxi), using the derogatory term derived from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. ‘He tommed while we were rat-racing for survival; he had the time and energy to say to us, “There must be humans on the other side of the fence; it is only we haven’t learned how to talk.”’ Two more *Drum* colleagues, Can Themba and Bloke Modisane, described a lifestyle that they both experienced and created, with values that exude vibrancy, sex and liquor, owing more to the Harlem Renaissance than to Houghton. In contrast, Nakasa’s subaltern instincts seem to aspire to an understated British ethos.

Though his writing is not as racy as that of his peers on *Drum*, Nakasa’s columns paint a picture of the bustling metropolis that was Johannesburg in the 1960s, still a city dependent on its gold, flush with mining profits and immigrants seeking their fortunes, exploring the technology at that time, its public transport and mass housing. In ‘Must we ride...to disaster?’ he describes the working-class hordes spilling out of the trains, meekly commuting between their dormitory suburb and their urban employment. Hundreds of people on the platform at Dube station

surged towards the doors – although there were already standing passengers in the coaches. Some leapt for the windows and forced their way in. They were still at it when the train began to pull out. I spotted a man in a khaki jacket clinging to the door rails, trying to make his way in. His cap fell to the platform and he jumped off to rescue it. One or two doors from a coach just missed dragging him along. I let the train go – like the old women who failed to make the grade in the scramble. By pushing other people with my arms and turning round to heave others with my buttocks, I was able to enter the next train, ‘the five-to-seven’ as regulars call it. At one stage my feet were clearly off the floor as other passengers flung me deeper into the coach. I couldn’t help wondering anxiously what would happen if a train like ‘the five-to-seven’ were ever to be involved in an accident. There I was pinned to the door by the other passengers... I travelled on several other trains during the morning and afternoon peak hours. (1985: 27-28)

A stranger in his own country, observing, but not observed, watching with a detached gaze the actions of commuters of whom he is not a regular part, Nakasa evinces both sympathy for the object of his attention, and the austerity of the impartial spectator. For him these journeys are extraordinary events, undertaken as part of his research for his newspaper column; not part of his normal daily routine, his journey is aimless in the sense that its focus is on travel itself, on the process rather than his

destination. His gaze, at once disengaged and concerned, is not returned, there being neither conversation nor relationship in this anonymous odyssey. Even the suspicion that his pocket is being picked turns out to be a mistake: 'I felt my wallet emerge from my back pocket and quickly clutched it with my hand. Turning round to see the culprit, I saw that the man had actually been pulling a handkerchief from his own pocket' (ibid.:28). Nakasa remains anonymous, ignored, just another cipher in this crowded scene. Here lies much of the paradox of Nakasa's insider/outsider position as contemporary flaneur, and an embodiment of alienation (Shields 1994:77); that as a black man in apartheid-era South Africa, he was both mobile and visible while also being part of a prohibited and marginalized majority. His identity constantly shifts between that of detached voyeur, observer and newspaper columnist, and that of the urban proletariat, between white privilege and black suppression, in the process challenging the binary nature of othering that was intrinsic to the partitioned state. Nadine Gordimer (1985:xxvi) writes 'Nat belonged not between two worlds but to both'; less romantically, Mongane Wally Serote (1985:xxxix) sees him as a controversial legend, playing black and white roles and appeasing both sides, with a disastrous result. Serote's tribute to Nakasa, first published in 1975, judges Nakasa's attempt to link the 'two distinct worlds...the gutter-trapped black world, and the opinionated, arrogant, racist, white world' as a failure (1985: xxxix). 'If by going to Parktown, Lower Houghton, Hillbrow and all those places that are supposedly hope amid disaster-bound South Africa, Nat wanted to create humans who would cross the fence to this side and walk the streets with kwashiorkor-battered grey-bellied kids... poor Nat, you failed.' A participant only as a spectator in disguise, and undercover as a worker, he claims as a basic right a freedom of movement that was to become a legal reality over 40 years later, in 1994.

Johannesburg is a city of refracted and often idealized images in the mirror Nakasa holds up, reflecting selectively the images he sees, sharing and absorbing information, for example the anecdotes of the Zulu watchman living on top of the apartment block (ibid.: 5). Much as Baudelaire shows compassion for the little old women ('Those broken souls were women long ago'), Nakasa evinces concern for people whose homes and life he chooses not to share, preferring to live, albeit on the move, in the white city and suburbs. In a series of vignettes he captures the conditions and hardship of proletariat life in the township, its crowding and crime – a life that he shared only

briefly, more as a voyeur than as victim. He remarks that, unlike visitors such as foreign correspondents, he is unable to approach Johannesburg with ‘the attitude of a disengaged visitor...I am part of Johannesburg’ (1985:3); but though he has an emotional attachment to the city, he retains an objective distance from event. In ‘Must we ride...to disaster?’, he refers to overcrowding on the trains, and ‘the old women who failed to make the grade in the scramble’ (ibid.: 27). In ‘Why taximen are terrified’, his focus is the taxi wars and the ‘string of taximen who had been attacked, killed, robbed by hooligans’ (ibid.:30). His column entitled ‘Victims of the knifeman’ describes the bloody trauma of the casualty department in Baragwanath Hospital. ‘The tendency to treat Africans as labour and not as individuals, human beings with human sentiments and desires, is devastating’, Nakasa writes in ‘Mental Corrosion’. ‘Among the hardest hit are family men who, only five years ago, had to demolish their homes in Sophiatown. They built new homes in Soweto or moved into Government-built houses and began improving them at great expense’ (ibid.:35).

This is one of his few references to the corrosive urban planning which started in Johannesburg shortly after his arrival in the late 1950s. His colleagues on *Drum* magazine had explored, represented and romanticized Sophiatown as a multi-racial enclave within the borders of Johannesburg, but Sophiatown is absent from Nakasa’s columns. Instead, he writes about the dormitory suburb of Soweto, the site of most of the above-mentioned vignettes. In ‘Snatching at the good life’ he describes Soweto thus:

At a glance, Soweto looks dull and lifeless. Almost all the houses are built to the same pattern...small match-box cottages separated from each other by wire fencing...One man complained to me that neighbours tend to keep to themselves in Soweto because their homes are fenced in and each has its private toilet. It’s not like Sophiatown, were you used to meet your neighbour for a chat as you went to the communal lavatories. (ibid.: 25)

Yet despite the uniformity, and lack of electricity, he remarks: ‘Soweto lives. It lives precariously, sometimes dangerously, but with a relentless will to survive’, with large American cars and occasional drinking sessions used as visible indicators of some degree of affluence: ‘People live haphazardly, in snatches of a life they can never afford to lead for long, let alone for ever’ (ibid.:26).

These disjointed episodes create a view of the city at that time, in writing composed of small brush strokes in Impressionist fashion, a phenomenological approach owing more to realistic representation than to interpretation, though his selection criteria are in themselves an interpretative device. His work is kaleidoscopic, its disconnected anecdotes and experiences, of visual and social phenomena, building a constantly changing picture of the city as he sees it, as a selection of snapshots rather than a panorama. At no point does Nakasa claim for himself an omniscient or panoptic perspective such as the overarching order and master narrative of the National Party. This impressionism may not have been deliberate, and his authorial intention is impossible to establish; but as a magpie collector of specimens Nakasa fits Benjamin's description of the flaneur 'who goes botanizing on the asphalt' (1983:36).

Nakasa has left an impression of Johannesburg in his writing that is all the more powerful for its absence of detail. Though he writes in the tradition of social realism that was challenged by Nkosi and by Jack Thompson of the Farfield Foundation, both of whom criticize African writing for its lack of innovation and imagination, Nakasa's life, his writings and his realism, challenge the official order of things legislated by the government of the day, not by direct confrontation but by subversive survival tactics, and in so doing present different faces of South African society to his reader. Nakasa's Johannesburg is a trace, not a route map, and for all his probable reading of Dickens and other socialist realist novels of the nineteenth century, there is little topography in his wanderings; incursions, excursions, dialogue and discussion weave, instead, a social matrix of impressions and personalities as real as a geographical grid.

...[The ambiguities... are... focused]... in Benjamin's concept of the 'trace', a term which turns on its axis within his work to present several faces. The traces of himself preserved by the bourgeois in his odds and ends of domestic articles are a thing of shabby compensation for the diminution of private life...it is such traces that Benjamin sees as expunged by the destructive character, the figure who, as in his romanticized image of Brecht, has purged himself of experience in order to become the faceless, cheerful, non-visionary agent of revolutionary violence that will blast out of history the apocalyptic empty space within which the new may germinate. He is the revolutionary antithesis of the flaneur, whose trackless ambulations among the crowd likewise clear a provisional space, but that of the magic circle in which his solitary subjectivity may disport itself. (Eagleton 1981:31)

The generation of angry young black writers who succeeded Nakasa (some of whom had their first publication in *The Classic*, the journal founded by Nakasa) would identify more readily with the destructive urge of this revolutionary character, than with the bourgeois aspirations of Nakasa, though they are neither faceless nor Brechtian. Wally Serote's angry paean to Alexandria, for example, as well as his picture of a commuter's nightmare in 'City Johannesburg', and Sipho Sepamla's 'To whom it may concern', speak of such revolutionary violence, of challenging an urban environment of brutal deprivation, rather than accommodating one of middle-class comfort and privilege. Unlike Nakasa, who finds a degree of alienation 'caused by the objective distance separating the descriptor from what he is describing' (Blanchard 1985:73) these poets explore the city through their own experience, as the heirs more of Engels than of Baudelaire. Serote is not masquerading as a worker when he rides the taxi; he is one with the workers, struggling to survive in harsh and dusty conditions, seeing none of the romance of the city, nor sharing Nakasa's aspirations, in his 'City Johannesburg':

Jo'burg City, I salute you;
 When I run out, or roar in a bus to you...
 Jo'burg City
 I travel on your black and white and robotted roads
 Through your thick iron breath that you inhale
 At six in the morning and exhale from five noon.

Jo'burg City

This is the time when I come to you...
 Jo'burg City, Johannesburg,
 Listen when I tell you,
 There is no fun, nothing, in it...
 Joburg City, you are dry like death,
 Jo'burg City, Johannesburg, Jo'burg City.
 (Serote 1982: 22-23)

Like Nakasa, Serote and Sepamla write about event, rather than structure; their writings are neither analytical nor historical, representing personal experience with very little remembrance of things past, though where Nakasa's vignettes are impressionistic, the angry young men who followed him – largely the Soweto poets of the 1970s – reveal their own emotions in work that is both engaged and expressionistic. In contrast to the detached British sense of *sang froid* evident in Nakasa's work, these urban poets are full of anger and frustration. There is, at any rate

in Nakasa's South African oeuvre, none of the nostalgia for the place and possessions of childhood that Walter Benjamin, for example, describes in his Berlin memories. Nakasa's world is an experiential 'rhetoric of walking' (De Certeau 1984:97) with a selective rather than a social-discursive approach that 'condemns certain places to inertia' (ibid.:99). In the process of tracing this 'conceptual city' Nakasa frequently inverts the obvious binaries of apartheid and the anticipated response to mundane situations with unexpected reactions that endorse a common humanity. This is particularly evident in his references to the ambivalent position of many Afrikaners, and the paradox of their humane instincts, their often generous actions, contrasted with their belief in racial segregation. In 'Johannesburg, Johannesburg', Nakasa describes a talented Afrikaner painter he met at a dinner party. Despite being a 'Nationalist, a supporter of Dr Verwoerd's apartheid policy, the...man had spent much of his afternoon trying to keep alive a newborn African baby which had been abandoned on the pavement' (Nakasa 1985: 8). This incident epitomizes the focus on the individual, and the brand of liberalism that Isabel Hofmeyr (1979:89) describes as including 'ideas of tendermindedness, paternalism'; a concern that addresses only the effects of apartheid, or social dislocation, and not its underlying causes and philosophy. Nakasa challenges him on the social aspects of policy: "How can you vote for apartheid and then come and drink brandy with me?" When Nakasa mentions that he has no place to stay "because of the laws you vote for", the Afrikaner invites him to stay: "But the party you vote for has passed laws which say that's illegal, too", I said... "Why are you a Nationalist if you are willing to stay with me? Don't you want the races to be separated?"...you see", he said, "I am an Afrikaner. The National Party is my people's party. That's why I vote for it" (Nakasa 1985:8).

Speculating on how white South Africans might react to a variety of situations if the tables were turned and they were the recipients of both charity and opprobrium, Nakasa leaves brief sketches of street-level public life in Johannesburg at that time. In 'The cruelty of closed eyes', he urges white South Africans to stop and think, commenting that:

We could do with some more action on the pavements of Johannesburg, too. This is where black workers have their lunch because nearly all restaurants in this town are reserved for 'whites only'. Respectable family men are daily reduced to the ground in this way. And white South Africa drifts by seeing

nothing odd or wrong in it. Yet there would be a major uproar if only a handful of white men were compelled to have their lunch sitting on a pavement in Commissioner Street. I wish some enterprising youths would try to make this town think about the other people who are compelled to eat like this. (1985: 156)

He continues in this ironic vein:

Perhaps naively, I think the same effect could be achieved by getting some white urchins to play penny whistles in the centre of the city. White Johannesburg swoons over African penny-whistle boys, but would it feel the same about little white boys forced to earn a few cents in this way? I suspect that there would be a public outcry. Johannesburg would want to know why the children were roaming the streets instead of attending school. There would be none of the familiar remarks about 'how sweet' the kids are. (ibid.)

Significantly, he concludes this column with a discussion of the semiotics of apartheid, the iniquitous, and, at the time, ubiquitous signage which changed from the terms Europeans and Non-Europeans (before South Africa departed from the Commonwealth) to Whites and Non-Whites; signage which has, since 1994 (and possibly earlier) disappeared from public places except for a couple of museums, notably the Apartheid Museum at Gold Reef City, south of Johannesburg; and the private museum, *Evita se Perron*, run by cross-dressing comedian Pieter-Dirk Uys at his home in Darling, in the Western Cape. The fate of these multitudinous signs, which once adorned all state-controlled park benches, railway benches, post office entrances, in fact any and every public building, is a post-apartheid mystery. Who collected them, where they were taken, and whether they were destroyed, remains obscure.

Nakasa comments that:

I would like to see white South Africans begin to think about the apartheid signs which one sees all over the country. You find them at pleasure resorts, at the gates of private homes and flats. Some read: 'Dogs and Natives not Allowed'; 'Hawkers and Natives use Back Entrance'. Imagine what would happen if an African businessman were to put up one of these signs, with 'Whites' substituted for 'Natives', at the entrance to his premises. The thought of it excites me, for I know of no other way in which we could get people to begin to think. (ibid.)

As with many of his columns, he closes with an anecdote in which 'good sense prevails', one that offers the possibility of a peaceful solution within the framework of the sort of liberalism that Martin Legassick describes as 'a force...to minimize or

disguise the conflictual and coercive aspects of the social structure' (1972: 1), an approach rejected by Marxists and Black Consciousness activists.

I am told that a white doctor in the platteland once had one of these 'hawkers-and-natives' signs on his gate. Then his mother died and a group of African nurses from the local hospital went to deliver a wreath at the doctor's house. The nurses stopped dead in their tracks when they saw the neat little sign. After a moment of pain and tension, good sense prevailed and the girls filed in to the doctor's yard. I hear the sign has since been removed. (Nakasa 1985:157)

'A whole history', writes Michel Foucault in conversation with Jean-Pierre Barou and Michelle Perrot, 'remains to be written of *spaces* – which would at the same time be the history of *powers* (both these terms in the plural) – from the great strategies of geo-politics to the little tactics of the habitat, institutional architecture from the classroom to the design of hospitals, passing via economic and political installations.' (Foucault 1980: 149). The obvious control of the South African government in allocating space through sign, visible evidence of the geopolitical master plan, is evident in this anecdote; but so, too, are the subversive tactics of the habitat, of the navigations of survival. This signage was later, in the 1970s, described as being indicative of so-called petty apartheid, the grand design being the balkanisation of the country into ethnic Bantustans. Nakasa's record leaves a trace for subsequent literary archeologists to excavate.

Benjamin describes the flaneur as the *genus loci*, and indeed Nakasa captures more often the spirit than the particulars of place. The apparently random nature of his tours differs from those of the Situationists, those radical Parisian contemporaries of Nakasa, led by Guy Debord, who might be considered Baudelaire's heirs, drawing an Ariadne's thread of place names with his 'Psychogeographical Map of Paris' (in 1953) though Nakasa in many ways shares their urban concerns. 'Psychogeography', writes Wilfried Hou je Bek (sic) in an online paper entitled *Flaneur culture: a double generative psychogeographical session*, 'is meant as an activity which is executed with the rigour of a scientific inquiry; a rational reductive discipline which strives to enlarge our knowledge of the ways in which capitalist interventions in public-space & the structure of urbanism are meant to influence the behaviour of the user of the city.' Bek's overview of this urban history, from flaneur to psychogeography, defines the

flaneur as ‘an icon of pedestrian culture... a temporary phenomena that couldn’t withstand the pressure to conform’, while the surrealists:

made an attempt to reintroduce the flaneur into the streets by making long strolls, hoping to be enchanted by the poetry of the metropolis. A world war later a close knit group of revolutionaries calling themselves situationists employed psychogeography to theorize the experimental city walk, the *derive*, into a tool for their neo-communist revolt.

Nakasa’s work lacks both specificity and radicalism, but his urban fragments find echoes in his more self-reflexive successors, such as Mpe and Vladislavić, in their tentative exploration of the effects of geographical settings on mood and behaviour, and more particularly in his appreciation of the city as a text to be read and deciphered. Phaswane Mpe’s description of Hillbrow in *Welcome to our Hillbrow*, written nearly half a century after Nakasa, finds both energy and despair in Johannesburg’s inner-city slum in the late twentieth century – an intense, urban environment that in some ways mirrors its multiracial predecessor, Sophiatown. His approach is more scientific than that of Nakasa, and by taking an almost mathematical grid as his descriptive base he is arguably an heir to Engels, rather than to Baudelaire. Marc Blanchard, in his study of Engels, Baudelaire and Rimbaud entitled *In search of the City*, describes this purposeful approach thus (1985: 35-36):

Walking through the streets of Manchester, Engels attempts to expose the fiction of the city on the grounds that its architecture conceals the indubitable proofmarks of a historical narrative process of division and exploitation of labour. His ambition is to uncover literally step-by-step the by-products of this exploitation and division and to show that the city of labor and industry, whose monstrosity had already been exposed by Carlyle and others, functions only at the cost of suffocating thousands of people dying of overwork, starvation and disease in its midst.

In a first chapter entitled ‘Hillbrow, the map’, Mpe writes:

You would experience no hardships walking to your flat through the streets of Hillbrow – that locality of just over one square kilometer, according to official records; and according to its inhabitants, at least twice as big and teeming with countless people... If you are coming from the city centre, the best way to get to Cousin’s place is by driving or walking through Twist Street, a one-way street that takes you to the north of the city. You cross Wolmarans and three rather obscure streets, Kapteijn, Ockerse and Pieterse, before you drive or walk past Esselen, Kotze and Pretoria Streets. You will then cross Van der Merwe and Goldreich Streets. Your next port of call is Caroline Street. Just cross to the other side of Caroline. On your left-hand side is Christ Church, the Bible Centred Church of Christ, as the big red letters announce to you. On your right-hand side is a block of flats called Vickers Place. You turn to your

right, because the entrance to Vickers is in Caroline Street, directly opposite another block, Da Gama Court. If you are not too lazy you will ignore the lift and walk up the stairs to the fifth floor, where Cousin stays... So far, you have not seen any car chases or witnessed a shoot-out. You did meet some semi-naked souls whom your guide, from the same village of Tiragalong, called prostitutes. Otherwise, the thing that stands out in your memory is the extremely busy movement of people going in all directions of Hillbrow, seeming to enjoy the neon lights of the suburb, while others appeared to be in a hurry to get to work. (Mpe 2001:1-7)

Mpe's work, ostensibly a novel, never strays far from the autobiographical; like his characters, he comes to Johannesburg from the Northern Province, and he too has died, as does his central character Refilwe, from the late twentieth century scourge of AIDS. Using this matrix of Hillbrow, his *derive* teases out the people and their passions, the fear and excitement of the city, its grime, its crime, and the hope it offers to rural ingénues of education and sophistication. But unlike Nakasa, who records transient relationships and interviews, Mpe identifies with his characters.

Conversely, Nakasa seldom ventures into fiction, his regular columns in the Rand Daily Mail providing a commentary on South African society as he sees it. Yet in his only known short story, 'My First Love' (about a school friend called Derrick who is led astray by the young woman teacher with whom he has an affair), Nakasa captures the lure of the city by night, his own nocturnal ramblings and wistful sense of the outsider looking in, a romantic striving for the unattainable. This ambivalence towards urban life is what Elizabeth Wilson describes as Benjamin's 'sorrowful engagement with the melancholy of cities...(which) seems to arise partly from the enormous unfulfilled promise of the urban spectacle, the consumption, the lure of pleasure and joy which somehow seem destined to be disappointed, or else are undermined by the obvious poverty and exploitation of so many who toil to bring pleasure to the few' (Wilson 1992: 10):

Once or twice I saw Derrick taking one of his long walks just after sunset. He had a habit of walking alone at night, for anything up to five miles or more. I don't remember how we got to talking one afternoon – and he spoke for a long time about his walks.

"This town is beautiful," he said in his heavy voice. "The street lamps produce fantastic silhouettes at night. I stood at the top of the hill last night, and for the first time the city looked like something created by man, from his own hands. I felt like I was towering over it like a giant. This town dwarfs you if you look at it from the bottom...". (Nakasa 1985: 201)

This romantic perception of the city at night echoes the sense of awe, and ‘calm so deep’ in Wordsworth’s sonnet ‘Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802’, where man too is absent from man-made edifices: ‘silent, bare,/Ships, towers, domes, theatres and temples lie/Open unto the fields, and to the sky:/...the very houses seem asleep’, as the poet communes with an essential beauty that lies in the eye of the beholder. So, too, are the sentiments of Baudelaire’s nocturnal musings repeated (1989:51):

O night! O refreshing darkness! For me you signal an inward celebration, you are the liberation from anguish! In the solitude of the plains, amidst the stony labyrinths of a capital, sparkling with stars, explosion of street lamps, you are the fireworks of the goddess Liberty!

As a humanist, Nakasa sees the city as a construct in which, in a none-too subtle analogy, he (or his protagonist) will heroically ignore limitations and surmount obstacles. In his Johannesburg pieces, Nakasa makes it apparent that he would not be dwarfed by looking at the city of gold from the bottom; quietly ambitious, he shows no signs of being intimidated by the scale of the city. His plane of movement is horizontal rather than vertical, his movements an even-handed appraisal of zones, both black and white, rich and poor. This is much the same city that Jurgen Schadeberg described, when he arrived from Germany in 1950, as:

two societies running parallel, without any communication whatsoever. There was an invisible wall between the two worlds. The black world or the ‘Non-European World’, as described by white society, was culturally and economically rejected by the white world. In the fifties the black world was becoming culturally and politically very dynamic, whereas the white world seemed to me to be isolated, cocooned, colonial and ignorant of the black world. As a newcomer and outsider I managed quite easily to hop from one world to the other...On both sides of the fence there were ordinary people living their lives, getting married, enjoying themselves, making music and dancing. Most people were ignorant of one another’s worlds despite the fact that they were neighbours, sharing the same air. (Schadeberg, 2001:1)

Arriving in Johannesburg some years later, Nakasa shares Schadeberg’s refusal to accept invisible walls. In Nadine Gordimer’s words, this was ‘the period of no fixed abode...homeless and yet curiously more at home in Johannesburg than those behind their suburban front doors...Nat belonged not between two worlds but to both of them’ (1985: xxiii-xxvi). In one of his best-known and most-quoted essays, entitled

‘Johannesburg Johannesburg’, Nakasa describes his first few years in Johannesburg, and how he moved between layers and zones of segregated society.

I had travelled from Durban, over four hundred miles by train, to start working as a journalist. After work I often slept on a desk at the office or stayed overnight when friends invited me to dinner in their homes.

This was not because of a Bohemian bent in me. Far from it. According to the law, ‘native’ bachelors are supposed to live in hostels in Johannesburg. I should have shared a dormitory with ten or more strange men...

Instead of this, I chose to be a wanderer. (Nakasa 1985: 3-4)

Though Nakasa denies having a Bohemian bent, he again refers to this style in one of his possibly biographical, probably allegorical stories:

This is the story of two young men with a Bohemian bent. The one is white and the other black. Both roam the streets of Johannesburg, squandering their youth and generally enjoying the business of flouting the city’s social conventions. The black character is a bold, reckless youth with voracious spending habits and a passion for the city’s looks by night. So the two would go out on long walks by night from the suburbs to the city and back. It is during one of these walks that there is trouble. The police catch up with the couple. Largely curious over the combination, the police stop the African and ask him for a pass. It is late and the police want to know why the black man is not in his location among his own people. Dramatically, the black man asks: “who are my people?” (Nakasa 1985:193)

By evading the system of control, Nakasa establishes his extraordinary and individual identity, neither seeking notoriety and confrontation, nor accepting a rule-bound society. ‘I didn’t really want a hostel bed’, he continues.... Thus, for roughly eighteen months, on and off, I wandered about without a fixed home address. I determined to make the best of it.’ (ibid.: 4). Nakasa’s arrival in Johannesburg was in the aftermath of Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country* and other cautionary tales of the ‘Jim comes to Jo’burg’ variety. But instead of presenting himself as a country bumpkin overwhelmed by the evils of fast living and loose women, Nakasa creates a wry and ironic distance between his own life and those he views, despite his early comments in ‘Johannesburg, Johannesburg’, that ‘I have often tried to put myself in this position, to approach Johannesburg with the attitude of a disengaged visitor. Unfortunately for me, I cannot succeed in doing this. I am part of Johannesburg’ (1985: 3). The nightwatchman, the workers in the city by day, the university students, are part of his transient experience and elusive presence. Columns grouped together as ‘Soweto pieces’, ‘Reporting at Large’, and ‘Personalities and Profiles’, all reflect the other, rather than Nakasa’s self, though his ‘Private thoughts’ (written shortly

before his departure) and Johannesburg pieces are ostensibly autobiographical. Nakasa's experiences are usually cerebral, visual and verbal, seldom tactile, with few descriptions of his own emotions or bodily experiences, unlike the physical immediacy evident in Can Themba, Bloke Modisane, or subsequent township writers.

Fortunately, like most young men from the smaller towns in South Africa, I was thrilled by simply being in Johannesburg. While others made for their homes hurriedly at the end of the day, I took long leisurely walks from one end of the city to another. (1975: 4)

This remarkable understatement belies his skill in avoiding the 'white by night' curfew of those times, and in avoiding arrest for a pass law offence. In comparison, the 'dompas' is a malign trope in works by Nakasa's successors, who illustrate the frustrations and anxiety of lives constrained by the need for black people to carry this pass at all times. This is evident in Mafika Gwala's 'Kwela-ride' ('Dompas!/I went through my pockets/Not there' (Gwala 2002:208)), Serote's 'City Johannesburg' ('This way I salute you:/My hand pulses to my back trousers pocket/Or into my inner jacket pocket/For my pass, my life' (Serote 1982: 22)), and Sipho Sepamla's satirical 'To Whom it May Concern':

He lives
Subject to the provisions
Of the Urban Natives Act of 1925
Amended often
To update it to his sophistication
Subject to the provisions of the said Act
He may roam freely within a prescribed area
Free only from the anxiety of conscription
In terms of the Abolition of Passes Act
A latter-day amendment
In keeping with moon-age naming
Bearer's designation is Reference Number 417181)
(Sepamla 2002: 203).

The ability to navigate around restrictive laws and to survive, despite apartheid, in the cities of South Africa is a hallmark of these writings. Nakasa's non-adversarial stance anticipates the open society of post-1994 South Africa, and his nomadic lifestyle is echoed by more recent immigrants in urban areas. His procedures and ruses typify the antidiscipline which form the subject of Michel de Certeau's study on the practice of everyday life:

If it is true that the grid of “discipline” is everywhere becoming clearer and more extensive, it is all the more urgent to discover how an entire society resists being reduced to it, what popular procedures (also “miniscule” [sic] and quotidian) manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only in order to evade them, and finally, what “ways of operating” form the counterpart, on the consumer’s (or “dominee’s”?) side, of the mute processes that organize the establishment of the socioeconomic order. (De Certeau 1984:xiv)

These skills at urban navigation and survival go beyond the neutrality of the spectator; Rob Shields (1994:61) describes the flaneur as ‘an ‘urban native’, the distant cousin of the environmentally attuned ‘sauvage’ who tracks prey through careful observation of the woods’. He compares the flaneur to the detective, seeking clues in physical and social physiognomy; but this ability to recognize signifiers is only one facet of the flaneur. Without a stable identity, Shields continues, ‘the notion of flanerie is essentially a literary gloss...uneasily tied to any sociological reality...as much mythic as it was actual’ (ibid.:62). The flaneur is in part trickster and artful dodger, satirist and indolent saunterer, whose constant quality, such as it is, is linked to a sense of individualism. And in the case of Nakasa, he is not only a Baudelairean ‘botanist of the asphalt’; the semiotics in his writing, his selection of which signs to recognize, which to represent, what to ignore is part of his survival strategy. Klaaste (1988: 5-6) describes his writing as ‘cunningly liberal, biting apologetic. He took careful digs at his personal situation and the intolerable forces that a sensitive person had to fight to survive in South Africa circa 1960.’ Serote (1985:xxx) identifies the ambiguous nature of his prose, describing Nakasa in terms of Gates’s signifying monkey, writing in code to please two different audiences:

To those who had eyes to see, and ears to hear, he significantly and clearly whispered a very important message – blackman, you are being lied to. And to whites, he put a mirror before them, and they saw a monkey jiving. Some whites marveled at this black curio. (Serote 1985: xxx)

Nakasa’s approach, lacking an over-arching analytic, is both less and more than sociological realism. His brief and selective cameos and narratives include a degree of the signifying that Gates describes as being part of the Afro-American narrative: ‘signifying depends upon the signifier repeating what someone else has said about a third person in order to reverse the status of a relationship heretofore harmonious, signifying can also be employed to reverse or undermine pretense or even one’s opinion about one’s own status.’ (Gates 1983:691) Nakasa’s Afrikaner anecdotes in

particular contain elements of the possibly allegorical or mythical friend – ‘my friend said’. ‘Afrikaner youth gets a raw deal (written in 1964)’ (Nakasa 1985:91-93) is frequently quoted by Afrikaans newspaper columnists (see following chapter) as an indication of Nakasa’s sympathy for this group, but is also an attack on Afrikaans institutions for drilling Afrikaans youth into submission. And his account of a socialite wedding (‘When VIP weds VIP’) can be read as an aspirational gossip column, or a mocking and satirical take on social pretension. The occasional carnivalesque elements in Nakasa’s writing – his vignette of Spokes Mashiane, the police raid on Aunt Sally’s shebeen, and the incident at the Texan coffee house – celebrate public revelry and a subversive evasion of the city’s restrictive practices.

Where did Nakasa the flaneur sleep? Here and there, it would seem, with no fixed abode, not unlike Baudelaire, who similarly walked the streets of Paris.

On some nights I spent long hours reading London papers in the *Rand Daily Mail* library. Friends who invited me to their flats soon got used to me turning up for a bath in addition to dinner and a drink. At times I slept in the night watchman’s room on the top of our office block. (1985:4)

As a result, he has a better acquaintance with the designated white areas of Johannesburg than with those zoned for Blacks. ‘I knew very little about the African townships. Like many other people I could have lived illegally in the townships, but I wanted to be in town, not five or fifteen miles outside...I was especially fascinated with Johannesburg by night’ (ibid: 50). For Nakasa, daylight revealed an unacceptable reality, one in which the hardships of lowly employment or of no employment provided a nagging reminder of inequality, suffering and injustice.

By day, the city became a depressing mess. There were too many Africans sweating away on company bicycles or lingering on pavements in search of work. More depressing would be the newly-recruited ‘mine boys’, scores of black men from all over Africa. They walked through town with blankets on their shoulders and loaves of bread under their armpits, to be housed in the hostels of the gold mines. They looked like prisoners to me. Some had blank, innocent faces and gazed openly, longingly at women passing by. Most of them, if not all, were illiterate and doomed to stay that way for the rest of their lives. I resented them because I felt a responsibility towards them and I was doing nothing about it. (ibid.: 5)

Here is Benjamin’s ‘genteel-amateur distaste for the industrial labour’, evincing simultaneous complicity and contempt. But it is not clear whether Nakasa’s

resentment is to be taken at face value, or whether it is ironic; and the ambiguity of his tone is part of his survival strategy. Is he endorsing capitalist suburbia and its attendant prejudices, which are paradoxically threatened by the very labour on which it depends to generate profits, then largely from the mines? – or is this wry tone a deceptive route to raising an awareness of the invisible labourer, in expressing relief at a fate he has been spared, and in so doing evincing an empathy if not solidarity with the proletariat when he himself is part of the petty bourgeoisie.

They spoiled my image of Johannesburg as the throbbing giant which threw up sophisticated gangsters, brave politicians and intellectuals who challenged white authority. This image of Johannesburg survived best at night... We believed that the best way to live with the colour bar in Johannesburg was to ignore it. (ibid.: 5)

This last sentence is one of the most important and defining statements in his writing. Not for Nakasa, then, the role of existential artist *engagé*. Like Baudelaire's poet, he is 'the man *of* the crowd as opposed to the man *in* the crowd' (Tester 1994:3). What separates him from the mass is his degree of awareness – 'a man who is driven out of the private and into the public by his own search for meaning. He is the man who is only at home existentially when he is not at home physically' (ibid.: 2) – thus the sense of being a man apart. Nakasa appears to have no domicile, no domestic base; and without the magnet of home and hearth, he is free to trawl the city, like Baudelaire's Parisian prowler. In his visual presentation of Johannesburg, he anticipates De Certeau's common hero:

an ubiquitous character, walking in countless thousands on the streets... a mass audience... a flexible and continuous mass, woven tight like a fabric with neither rip nor darned patches, a multitude of quantified heroes who lose names and faces as they become the ciphered river of the streets, a mobile language of computations and rationalities that belong to no one. (De Certeau 1984:ix)

In describing this teeming mass, it is these procedures and ruses that typify the antidiscipline which form the subject of Michel de Certeau's study on the practice of everyday life, reaffirming a degree of individual possibilities and choice. De Certeau defines a tactic as:

A calculus which cannot count a "proper" (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality... A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantage, prepare

its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances... it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized “on the wing”... Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into “opportunities”. (De Certeau 1984: xix)

This is, De Certeau continues, a form of Sophistry, to make the weaker position seem stronger, by turning the tables on the powerful, using practical intelligence and ways of operating. He uses the example of the North African living in Paris, insinuated into the low-income, high-rise environment of the *banlieue*, who finds ways of using the constraining order of the place, and who, ‘by an art of being in between...draws unexpected results from his situation’ (ibid.: 30) – which applies much to South Africa, and particularly to Nakasa’s description of his life in the metropolis. De Certeau continues:

A tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus... The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power...it is a maneuver “within the enemy’s field of vision” (as von Bulow put it) and within enemy territory...it takes advantage of opportunities...It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary power...in short, a tactic is the art of the weak. (ibid.: 37)

And most significantly, perhaps, De Certeau describes a tactic as a ruse ‘determined by the absence of power’ (ibid.: 38), which aptly describes Nakasa’s survival strategies. To illustrate his assertion that ‘We believed that the best way to live with the colour bar in Johannesburg was to ignore it’, in ‘Johannesburg, Johannesburg’ (1985: 5), Nakasa uses an anecdote about his experience at the Texan, a coffee bar in Commissioner Street in downtown Johannesburg reserved for whites only. He and his (black) friend use diversionary tactics, after ordering coffee:

The Texan’s son went to fetch the coffee, obviously expecting us to drink it on the pavement, anywhere outside the bar. Meanwhile, my friend and I began to talk loudly about President Eisenhower’s portrait. “Look at the bum”, my friend started...“there is something seriously wrong with America’s choice of its heroes”...By the time the Texan’s son brought our coffee, his father was embroiled in violent argument with us, all about Ike...The argument was still raging when we finished drinking the coffee and left. Nobody seemed to remember the colour bar. (ibid.: 6)

In this café scene, Nakasa is rooted in the reality of Johannesburg, even though he takes the city on his own terms. How different, fifty years later, is the Café Europa in Ivan Vladislavić’s satirical novel, *The Restless Supermarket*, which is riddled with a

pastiche of nostalgia for a lost white identity in both Hillbrow and the Europe that the city's immigrants had left. Written in a similar idiom to Italo Calvino's fantastical essays on Venice, *Invisible cities*, and Jan Morris's novel *Hav*, about a mythical city-state, Vladislavić's work is predicated on this fiction, which exposes seismic social changes in the inner-city, from being a white port of entry, to one in which black immigrants arrive and settle. His mythical Café Europa is decorated with a mural depicting

the walled city of Alibia, where I had roamed so often in my imagination. In the foreground was a small harbour, with a profusion of fishing boats and yachts, and a curve of beach freckled with umbrellas. The palm-lined promenade cried out for women twirling parasols and old men nodding in Bath chairs with rugs over their knees. There were wharves and warehouses too, by no means quaint but necessarily Dickensian, and silos fat with grain, and tower cranes... Houses were heaped on the slopes behind, with narrow streets and squares... On one straight stretch of canal, evidently frozen over, one expected to see skaters in woolen caps... The baroque steeple of St Cloud's, intricately iced, measured itself against glazed office blocks... while in the east a clutch of onion domes had been harrowed from the black furrow of the horizon. A Slav would feel just as at home there as a Dutchman. (Vladislavić 2001:19)

In one of his final columns before leaving South Africa, Nakasa comments, prophetically, that:

Life abroad lacks the challenge that faces us in South Africa. After a lifetime of illegal living in the Republic's shebeens, the exiles are suddenly called upon to become respectable, law-abiding citizens. Not a law to break in sight. For my part, it would be an act of providence if I survived under such circumstances. I have broken too many curfew laws and permit regulations to change so easily. Even if I did change, I would miss the experience of illegal living. (1985:168)

The apparently random nature of his experiences conceals a masterly selection of event, often with a final twist that is closer to the style of the short story than of straightforward reportage, with narrative augmenting description; this is writing in which 'imagination augments the values of reality' (Bachelard 1994:3), thus inverting Lewis Nkosi's often-quoted criticism of black South African writing as journalism masquerading as literature, in that there are distinctly literary elements of Nakasa's writing contained in his journalism.

The human construct is integral to Nakasa's cityscape, for while he avoids both mapping the city and describing architectural detail, he concludes many of his

columns with a personal encounter. David Frisby describes this technique thus: ‘One of the ways of accessing other dimensions of the cityscape is to examine the figures who populate it. More specifically, social theories of modernity have often had recourse to real and metaphorical figures in order to illuminate their methodology and substantive theories’ (Frisby 2001:7).

Structurally, Nakasa’s set pieces follow a general, but not unvarying pattern by introducing a theme with a particular geographical setting – Pretoria, Harlem or Fordsburg – and ending with an anecdote that is often tangential to this introductory setting; these anecdotes are frequently ironic, exposing and undermining the hypocrisies and anomalies of that particular situation. Rooted in social geography, these vignettes are shaped as narrative rather than an inventory of place. In a brief mention of the University of the Witwatersrand, which ‘has never been as “open” as its Public Relations Office suggests’, he describes how students who

intrigued with their discovery of an area of life relatively free from the colour bar...[would descend] on Uncle Joe’s restaurant in Fordsburg, the predominantly Indian quarter at the west end of town. They came to eat Indian curry and listen to jazz in what was the only restaurant that allowed jam sessions before mixed audiences. Although there was a police station nearby, nothing was done to stop the sessions at Uncle Joe’s restaurants. We concluded that the police refrained from interfering because Uncle Joe gave them take-away food on credit. (1985: 7)

This non-racial enclave becomes, in his gaze, a place of possibility, incorporating scepticism, sanity and good humour. It belies the wider reality and the draconian future of South Africa in the twentieth century, though his optimism anticipates the political reconciliation to follow. It is in these discursive interludes that his imaginative powers reside, starting from a base for speculation that is more social than geographical, but which does not make an escapist leap beyond the bounds of probability.

French philosopher Gaston Bachelard illustrates the escapist possibilities of the imagination in discussing the poetics of space, when he refers to Hermann Hesse’s fragment about the prisoner who has painted a landscape on the wall of his cell, illustrating a miniature train entering a tunnel. When his jailers come to get him, he asks them to wait, and after climbing into the picture, he ascends the train, and

disappears into the darkness of the tunnel. (Bachelard 1994: 150); a metaphoric escape of the imagination that Nakasa seems unable to make.

The romantic relationship Nakasa has with Johannesburg does not extend to Pretoria; in his one documented visit there ‘to gauge the atmosphere and feel the heartbeat of the capital city’ (1985: 49) he finds that ‘all of Pretoria wants to keep me at arm’s length’. This is a city where the Afrikaners seem to be more at home than anywhere else in the country, whereas ‘the non-whites shuffle...and carry an air of uncertainty’, despite the fact that benches in the City Hall’s garden do not have the ‘Whites only’ sign painted on them: ‘Apparently Pretoria takes it for granted that no black man would ever dream of sitting on them’ (ibid.). The ruse he uses to circumvent official restrictions is one of naive innocence; when he asks to look inside the ‘new, blue-faced Public Administration Building’, the white concierge replies “If they catch you, I didn’t see you”.’ This is the evasive response of a petty bureaucrat torn by the dual demands of official duty and personal indolence, a man operating in a controlled and controlling environment. Eventually breaking through these regulatory barriers, Nakasa finally meets a young Afrikaner academic with whom he debates politics and separate development. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen hatred against me in the eyes of a Bantu”, he said...“perhaps I’ve been lucky, but then I have never met Mandela.” “You’ll be surprised,” I said. “I know Mandela. He used to give me lifts in his car when he lived near my place. And I know that he has no hatred in his eyes. He has friends who are Afrikaners.”(ibid.: 52).

Whatever the veracity of this anecdote might be, it is the authenticity of the defining spirit of that particular time in Nakasa’s work that leaves a lasting impression. His subversive actions, seeking to undermine the power and authority of the institutions of apartheid, illustrate both the impenetrability and ultimate vulnerability of this granite-faced city and its granite-faced inhabitants. The Mandela/Afrikaner anecdote is both a symptom of the possibilities that still seemed evident in South Africa, prior to the Rivonia Trial, and a prescient foretaste of the inter-racial accommodation that would follow after the meetings in Dakar, and political changes of the 1990s.

Pretoria is, and was, centred around government offices, though its complex downtown arcades simulate those in Paris, and are largely absent from Johannesburg

then and now, where shopping malls have replaced the department stores of the 1950s. Nakasa describes neither shopping nor window-shopping in his writing. In fact, there is a marked absence of commodities mentioned in a city noted for its commercial activity at a time (the 1960s) when the nascent post-second World War consumer boom was moving into gear.

Shopping and window-shopping do not constitute flaner^{ie}, since the desire for the object on display rules out the necessary distance which characterizes the flaneur's relationship to the public sphere. In addition, the shopper is engaged in a kind of purposive mobility which has nothing to do with the detached and aimless strolling of the flaneur. (Wolff 1994:125)

Nakasa's one recorded foray into a shop is yet another wry account of his transgressive skills, manipulating the terrain of the wealthy and finding a different world from the hostile and adversarial expectations of segregated shopping. There is no mystique in objects, no commodity fetish in his laconic account of a shopping expedition, entitled 'Shopping can be a bruising business'. Hardly a dandy, he writes 'People who see me often will testify that I am not the best-dressed man in Johannesburg', continuing:

I am capable of managing for two years with one suit, one necktie and one pair of shoes. This has nothing to do with lack of means or a passion to identify myself with the proletariat. If anything, I have always nursed a secret admiration for men who dress well...I don't buy more clothes simply because shopping has always proved a trying business for me...I never know whether to speak fanagalo or proper English when I place my order for a pencil or a pair of shoes. (1985:18-19)

Listing a series of the humiliations and neglect to which Africans were subjected ('There are many shops where non-whites are not allowed to try on anything'), Nakasa ends in a typically upbeat fashion with an anecdote about his recent experience in a large (unnamed) store, where he was treated to 'the best service Johannesburg can offer'. Clearly not a budget store, it has a basement where he was left 'peering at expensive morning gowns, golf caps and waistcoats.' The salesman 'withdrew swiftly like a butler who had disturbed his master' and returns with jackets. 'I was so overwhelmed that I bought more than I had originally intended. I even acquired a waistcoat for the first time in my life...then I decided to press my luck a little and went to sit on one of four or five expensive chairs provided for the customers. But even this did not ruffle the man's politeness.' (ibid.:20). For white

South African readers, this shopping foray offers a glimpse into the world of the black 'other'.

Incidents like this fuelled Nakasa's detractors; his upwardly mobile instincts are hardly revolutionary Marxist fodder likely to speed up the liberation of the working classes; but, rather like Voltaire's *Candide*, his optimistic assessment seems to be that anything is possible in the best of all possible worlds. However the apparent aimlessness of this excursion belies another level of consumerism; 'as Benjamin suggested', writes David Frisby (2001:12-13), 'the flaneur may appear to be strolling aimlessly but is, in reality, in search of a market for his or her images of the city... a neglected dimension of flanerie is revealed, namely the flaneur as *producer* (of texts, images, etc.).' Inasmuch as he was a paid and commissioned columnist, Nakasa was not seeking a market so much as supplying it with the requisite commodity, namely his views on Johannesburg, even if he depicts himself as a reluctant consumer. Like Baudelaire, he 'knew what the true situation of the man of letters was: he goes to the marketplace as a flaneur, supposedly to take a look at it, but in reality to find a buyer'. (Benjamin 1983:34)

Eagleton, again, comments that:

If the flaneur knows the delights of possessing unpossessed and seeing unseen, of tasting transiently so as to remain self-composed, the commodity disports itself with all comers without its halo slipping, promises permanent possession to everyone in the market without abandoning its secretive isolation... It is obvious, then, that the flaneur cannot compete with the commodity, for though both are ironically aware of the abstractly quantified nature of the masses from whom they beckon out certain privileged subjects, such quantification is for the commodity the very condition of its existence. The flaneur, by contrast, fights a losing battle against the crowd's impersonality, struggling to maintain his *sang froid* in the rush imbuing the masses with the last tattered vestiges of an aura he will then be able narcissistically to recoup from it. Just as his lifestyle represents a desperate domestication of the urban, turning shop-signs into wall ornaments and news-stands into private libraries, so his faltering gaze strives to aestheticize the city (1981: 27)

In his column on Vrededorp, entitled 'Quite a place, Fourteenth Street', Nakasa also celebrates a multi-cultural enclave rather than specific commercial objects of desire. 'With fez and saris galore, Fourteenth Street represents a distinct and vital dimension of Johannesburg. It stands out prominently against a background of the more ordinary

and even drab shopping centres elsewhere in the city' (1985: 16-17). As a consumer of sights and goods, Nakasa the flaneur is a 'vicarious conqueror, self-confirmed in his mastery of the empire of the gaze' (Shields 1994:78). What follows, in this column, is not a debate on the nature of capitalism, but rather on the nature of the place. Here, in his opinion, Johannesburg can take its place as a world centre, sophisticated and vibrant, and he compares its fame to that of Downing Street and Fleet Street in London – neither of which had he seen. Again, Nakasa's frame of reference is Anglo-American rather than African, with London and New York preferred to Cairo, Entebbe or Lagos, which do not rate a mention.

Fourteenth Street in Vrededorp is long overdue for recognition as one of Johannesburg's most famous streets. This street, entirely Indian-controlled, does business with people of all races, all walks of life, from Soweto to Mayfair, from Houghton to Japan, India, Europe, England and the United States.... Well-known Nationalists come all the way from the platteland to buy in Fourteenth Street. It is possible to find members of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange or a City Councillor's wife waiting to be served after an African labourer in Fourteenth Street. I am willing to stick my neck out and say Fourteenth Street has all the makings of a truly great street. Perhaps not in the same way as Fifth Avenue but certainly as a showpiece of good race relations if anybody wants that sort of thing these days. (ibid.: 16)

Though his frame of reference is Anglo-American, Nakasa the explorer is clearly enchanted by the exotic qualities of this area where 'The names of the shops in this Oriental quarter alone lend colour to our clearly ugly town. They are as exotic as the African names after which some of our towns (Gigindlovu) and rivers (Umfolozi) are named. It is in Fourteenth Street where you find Surtees Outfitters and Hafajees Bazaar or Habbib Stores' (ibid.). With his guide, a Moslem businessman, he strolls through 'the rest of Vrededorp – Pageview officially – to see some of the people there' (ibid.:17). They begin their tour at the Mosque 'For this is a deeply religious community.... It is the various religions – Moslem, Christian and Hindu – which bind each element of the community together' (ibid.). His is the gaze of the flaneur, the visual consumer, the stranger finding a romantic orientalism in this alien environment. It is the people rather than the products of Vrededorp that intrigue Nakasa, a community that has lived together for the past 60 years, and whose common love for the area 'seems to weld all three sections together'. In its present state he sees the confluence of the past and the possibilities for the future of a rich urban mix, very different from a Marxist analysis that might have seen exploitation and class conflict brewing in such a volatile commercial environment. Engels, writing in the nineteenth

century, 'had depicted the modern metropolis as the site of modern capitalist estrangement' (Frisby 2001:4); but issues of labour, profit, or surplus capital, are not issues that Nakasa addresses.

Nor is gender a topic in his writing; he seldom refers to women, and even in his correspondence there is only one passing reference to a meaningful romantic relationship with a woman. In a letter to Lewis Nkosi, dated May 1963, he writes:

Harry Mashabela and Kumalo tell me that your sexual life is pretty full. I don't thin(k) I can be accused of letting the side down in any way. I'm still living in sin with a young lady whose main virtue is that thoughts of getting married to me have never entered her mind. I find that most convenient because I cannot cope with a wife yet. (*Classic files*)

Nakasa's colleagues were male, for the most part; the only women mentioned by the Drum writers were as objects of desire, like pin-up girl Jubby Mayet. For the rest, their affairs are largely anonymous.

In her essay, 'The artist and the flaneur: Rodin, Rilke and Gwen John in Paris', (1994:111-137) Janet Wolff looks at flanerie as a gendered occupation, one that largely excluded women, at any rate in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century. In Nakasa's Johannesburg, there is no record of a black woman claiming the same freedom to wander at will at that time, and in all probability any woman then doing so would, as in Paris the previous century, have been vulnerable to exploitation, her motives seen as those of a prostitute loitering with intent. His own gaze, certainly, is male, and his freedom to roam, unfettered by domestic claims, contains an element of the rogue male hovering on society's periphery.

One of the few women he describes (in 'Between two worlds') is Aunt Sally, of the eponymous shebeen, who straddles the public/private sphere, and challenges issues of masculine control. When the police raid the shebeen – a place of conspicuous consumption – it is Aunt Sally, the buxom proprietress, who takes charge: "Make quick", she screamed "The police! Lock top and bottom!" The situation is defused, and she remarks that "It's all fixed up now" (Nakasa 1985: 9). The point of this anecdote is to illustrate how easy it is to cross the colour line, which for Nakasa's two white journalist friends was their 'first taste of life on "the fringe"', but as a feminist vignette it is a pointer to the fact that this life in a No Man's Land includes a degree of

role reversal, from the white male authority of the governing party to the creative energy of what was effectively a frontierswoman. Fulfilling a public function denied to black people at that time, shebeens were, and are, often located in domestic interiors, fudging the relationship between paying client and houseguest. The shebeens Nakasa describes in ‘And so the shebeen lives on...’ are

not just money-making concerns which can be closed on instructions from a management or board of directors. They are hospitable homes, often run by solid housewives and respectable men. They are not like the municipal bar lounges with their business atmosphere and the inevitable high fencing which gives them the look of cages. Besides, non-whites can live only on the fringes of South African society. For too long they have been the stewards serving whisky to whites in places where no black man can drink. Out of these conditions, from the bottles stolen from hotel cellars, the shebeens were born. (Nakasa 1985:15)

This is one of the rare instances when Nakasa moves from a public exterior to a relatively private interior. The neutral anonymity of public space is his preferred environment, yet there is in his writing neither alienation nor the ennui of the city – not, at any rate, in Johannesburg. His New York experience is of a different order; seen as a tourist abroad, he becomes an object of suspicion and patronage, the observer observed, a tourist/flaneur.

The enormous expansion of international tourism in the global environment of the late twentieth century has made the tourist as flaneur, or flaneur as tourist, a common sight; a camera-toting, crane-necked stranger, wandering, often aimlessly, through the sights and sites of city and country, sometimes shepherded, sometimes solitary. What the two have in common is an element of bourgeois dilettantism; the lone tourist, like the flaneur, free from the constraints of time-keeping and spatial specifics, though in the tightly structured world of guided tours, the group tourist frequently has to observe rigid deadlines and rendezvous. Neither is gainfully employed for the duration of this experience, whatever alternative personae they may have in a different context. And while it is as dangerous to essentialise the nature of the tourist as it is to present a one-dimensional flaneur, what they have in common is the sense of private discovery extracted from a public experience in which they play the role of spectators, sometimes voyeurs, seldom actors.

Stefan Morawski draws the link between the two states, thus, in a rather ambivalent description:

The flaneur shares with the regular tourist an incognito status and an intense curiosity. But their curiosities are of different sorts. The tourist does not mind what he [sic] observes because it does not directly touch his skin and soul. Being anchored in a definite homeliness left only for temporary vacations, the tourist comes across foreign homeliness which he deems to be, even if strange and unpleasant, as much rooted as one's own. The flaneur is a kind of tourist at home, a native who feels partly homeless. The tourist can, of course, practise flanerie, but as an additional exercise. He pursues a spectacle that does not demand intimation. The flaner's self-imposed duty is intimating what is seen. Flaner is firmly linked to definite spatial and temporal coordinates. Its distance from the crowd which promised only a momentary shelter to assuage the state of loneliness (and remove the tedium) does not stir imagination and lucid frenzy. It is the reverse of the hinted fear. The flaneur is not on vacation from reality's rules. (1994: 185)

Of the many faces of this tourist/flaneur, the scholarly traveller is one, and this mix of gawking stranger, student and scribe defines Nakasa and his ambiguous reactions to America. He arrived in the United States on an exit permit from South Africa in order to take up his Nieman Fellowship at Harvard University, and the only record of his time there are the two columns he wrote shortly after his arrival, in the honeymoon of first impressions and before the corrosive effects of disillusion and despair could take their toll. Where he differs from the tourist described by Morawski (above) is that he had not left South Africa for a 'temporary vacation'. This sense of homelessness pervades his American writings, with the possible exception of his visit to the Schomburg Library in Harlem 'where, for the first time in my life, I saw a collection of writings by distinguished black men.... This came as a thrill to me. For, where I come from, all great men are whites' (1985: 178). He is both exile and immigrant, joining, by dint of his scholarship to Harvard, the community of migrant intellectuals but denied by his own country the right to return.

His alienation in New York is evident from the start; intimidated, possibly, by the scale of the place, he reveals himself as being more comfortable in a smaller town, preferring the 'charming neighbourhood, (i.e. of Boston and nearby Cambridge, Massachusetts) with lovely old wooden homes that look like homes, not a conglomeration of symmetrical slums' (1985:172-3). Similarly, he remarks, in 'Mr Nakasa goes to Harlem', that 'Harlem like all New York, is the most indescribable place I have ever seen. It humbles the visitor by its size alone'. While he seems to

have made a seamless transition from Durban to Johannesburg, appropriating South Africa's largest city as his own, he is at sea, metaphorically, in the much larger metropolis of New York. A foreigner, far from home, his frame of reference is South African and in these two features ('Met with Smiles and Questions', and 'Mr Nakasa goes to Harlem') he resorts to the social equivalent of translation, hoping to find, in these comparisons, a significance which would provide both meaning for his experience, and relevance for his South African readers, as these two columns were written for the *Rand Daily Mail* in Johannesburg. His bird's-eye view is of superficial comparisons, and like many tourists he relies on chance encounter for social comment; a taxi driver, a policeman on point duty, the churchman in a cafeteria.

'There was the churchman I met in the cafeteria at the basement of his church. I told him I was a journalist from South Africa and that I wished to talk with anybody who had some time', he remarks (1985:179). But instead of conversation, Nakasa is fed charity in the form of a cup of coffee, and some take-away food – half a chicken and several buns. "That's the best I can do for you, my friend", remarks the churchman.' Nakasa becomes, in this encounter, an object of pity, his status challenged as independent observer – and, he responds, 'It's no use saying that the churchman misunderstood me.... Rightly or unfairly, I drew certain inferences from this incident. There can be no doubt that there are many Negroes in Harlem who look down on Africans in the same way that many Johannesburg Africans foolishly despise other Africans, or the English condescend, insufferably, to Americans' (ibid.).

This incident contains the hypocrisy of charity that Baudelaire recounts in his vignette 'The Counterfeit Coin' (included in *The Parisian Prowler*). In a reversal of his role in Johannesburg, from subject to object, Nakasa, the flaneur with the controlling eye, becomes in the eyes of the churchman a visible object who is both threatening and contemptible. The churchman's donation acquires the quality of a commercial transaction in which Nakasa is the recipient of payment to fob off an unwanted relationship. The gift of food is a form of devalued coinage, counterfeit money much like that given to the beggar in Baudelaire's tale; it is food with no meaning, to the donor; as a donation of worthless goods it is a dismissive gesture. Baudelaire's friend (the donor) remarks that "here's no sweeter pleasure than surprising a man by giving him more than he hopes for"... then I understood clearly

that he had tried at one and the same time to accomplish an act of charity and a good deal; to earn forty pennies and God's heart; to carry off paradise economically; finally to snatch gratis his certificate as a charitable man' (1989:70). Derrida (1992:139) describes this as the economy of alms: 'The beggar looks threatening, incriminating, accusatory, vindictive... You must pay... so as to acquit yourself with regard to the spirit, the ghost, the god... Neither the demand nor the gift it elicits can be foreign to calculation, be it a sacrificial calculation... Even if the gift or the alms were authentic money, fully titled and guaranteed, this experience would not be pure of all calculation or all parade.' The unfortunate beggar is defenceless, speechless, 'but by the same token he accuses, he frightens, he begins to persecute like the law... an order that comes from outside the economy' by taking on the mute expression of a beaten dog. 'The poor man is a dog of society, the dog is the fraternal allegory of social poverty, of the excluded, the marginal, the homeless' (ibid.:141-3). Nakasa, in this context, appears to the churchman as a threat, part of a disquieting, reproachful, marginal community; another instance of his insider/outsider identity, being both a black man in Harlem and also a foreigner, an African in America.

Ivan Vladislavić, writing about white immigrants in late- and post-apartheid Johannesburg, describes the mural in the Café Europa as 'a perfect alibi, a generous elsewhere in which the immigrant might find the landmarks he had left behind' (2001: 19); and Nakasa, now the immigrant, is closer to this fractured and backward-looking identity than to the confident man-about-town he had been at home in Johannesburg.

Before leaving for America, Nakasa had read essays by Langston Hughes and James Baldwin and 'they made Harlem sound like one of the townships in Johannesburg. When Baldwin spoke of the ghetto, I likened Harlem to Sophiatown. I had visions of private homes turned into shebeens... Here I would find the drinking fraternity and be welcomed like a long-missed cousin. But Harlem drinks in nightclubs and bars, like the white folk. In Harlem I missed the sense of danger which characterised our drinking sessions, many of which were so rudely interrupted by the Johannesburg police. Harlem has a façade of respectability, the kind I associate with white suburbia' (Nakasa 1985: 3-4). The taxis there are licensed; in Johannesburg he was used to 'overloaded pirate taxis'. There are banks in Harlem, despite its rough reputation, while 'nobody ever risked opening a bank in Sophiatown or Edenvale'.

Segregation in South Africa was specific, with clearly designated townships, whereas in Harlem ‘my friends had difficulty showing me where it began. Besides, I hear there are whites living there as well, which would not be tolerated where I came from’ (ibid.:174). (He seems unaware of the irony of this last statement, in that much of his earlier work describes his own successful invasion of white suburbia.) Some may be living in Harlem, but ‘white folks downtown seem to be somewhat apprehensive about going uptown. Taximen kept turning me down ...when I wanted a ride to my hotel in Harlem.... Some whites drive through Harlem’, he continues, anticipating Tom Woolf’s *Bonfire of the Vanities*, ‘but take care not to stop any place. It is worse for Southern motorists...in this respect, as in many others, Harlem is reminiscent of Johannesburg. The few whites who do go to our townships do so at their own peril’ (ibid.: 175). And continuing his take on race relations in Harlem, he remarks that the outsiders are white shopkeepers: ‘I saw them straining to be polite and friendly to unresponsive black customers. Some of them were aware of the disadvantages at which Harlem is placed inside those decaying tenements, with all the dope-peddling and the numbers business.... They seemed so removed from Harlem that I wonder if they had any intimate understanding of its problems’ (ibid.:182). ‘I saw filth and squalor and saw people climb from plush cars into disgusting hovels – their homes,’ he further comments, and yet ‘I felt more at home in Harlem than I could ever be in the plush hotels downtown.... The people here are still fighting for a place in the sun, just like me’ (ibid.: 174). Any hint of the flaneur-as-dandy has by now disappeared, as Nakasa starts to shift to a more vigorous black identity. Where the Parisian flaneur in the previous century might have taken a turtle for a walk, Nakasa comments of Harlem that ‘I did not see poodles and fox terriers in the place, I did not see housewives take dogs for afternoon walks, a practice I know only as having something to do with white affluence’ (ibid.). He continues with an anecdote about dogs in Harlem, who during riots forced a looter to the ground and made off with the sausages the man had stolen. Nakasa’s tone is frequently one of fear and hostility, depicting a society that is, or that seems to him to be, threatened, acquisitive and aggressive. This is unlike the vibrant possibilities Nakasa describes in Fordsburg, despite the prevailing legislation there in terms of which even cemeteries in Johannesburg were segregated.

On his arrival in New York, he is met with smiles and questions, and remarks on the friendliness of the American people:

However, I did not like New York – that is, those few parts of it that I saw. The city has the looks of a great, modern slum. Too many of its tall, redbrick buildings reminded me of Durban's many-storeyed hostels where African men live. The difference is that the New York buildings don't have high wire fencing around them like the 'game reserves' (which is what we used to call them) in Durban. Instead they look more like giant filing cabinets, with people packed neatly inside, many of them doomed never to know the joy of a detached home with a backyard to themselves. (ibid.: 172)

His subsequent comments about inner city decay are prophetic, and anticipate the 'menacing monster' of Mpe's Hillbrow (2001:3):

The landlords of the city have apparently been left to make their cash the best way they please. Many of the structures, countless blocks of flats, are without painting on the outside. A lot of the passages and corridors are in a state of perpetual semi-darkness, and few people see the sun rise in the morning. The buildings are so high that they cast gloomy shadows over each other. (Nakasa 1985:172)

New York by night takes on a different cast, with more of the urban sophistication that Nakasa craved, and the milieu of the flaneur, part realist, part romantic:

Come the night, and New York transforms into a dazzling beauty queen. Instead of the gloomy half-hearted shadows of the day, you get the genuine darkness contrasted with the brilliance of a multitude of bright lights. This is when the night prowlers pour into the streets, wrapped in heavy coats, for their share of pub crawling and party life. (ibid.)

His delight in the artifice of this peopled city, compared to the emptiness of the passage taken from his short story, is moulded into a narrative of travel and romantic experience; conversely this city, this American metropolis, provokes in Nakasa a sense of alienation that he did not experience in Johannesburg. There he found, like Baudelaire's Parisian prowler (1981:21), that:

multitude and solitudes [are] equal and interchangeable terms for the active and fertile poet...the poet enjoys the incomparable privilege of being able, at will, to be himself and an other. Like those wandering souls seeking a body, he enters, when he wants, into everyone's character... The solitary and thoughtful stroller draws a unique intoxication from this universal communion.

The glamour and sophistication of New York by night are a poor substitute for the by now mythic reaches of his own Ithaca, the homeland to which he cannot return, sharing with other South Africans a nostalgia that was subsequently to overwhelm

him. The nocturnal background he describes, presumably a nightclub, is the scene for his meeting with fellow South Africans Hugh Masekela and Miriam Makeba's daughter:

I listened to the Johannesburg trumpeter, Hugh Masekela, blowing Pondo and Swazi tunes in Greenwich Village [he remarks]... "I wish I could go home... just to hear the music of the people there – the Pondos, the Zulus and the Shangaans." Shortly after that, I had listened to Miriam Makeba's daughter reciting her own poetry and talking about "the Boers and my people in Johannesburg"... I wondered if she knew that Bantu Education would have taught her how to weave grass mats instead of learning about the 20th century. (1985:172)

Therein the ambivalence of his position, and his double coding; he is prepared to remain 'on speaking terms with Afrikaners [despite] their attitudes to black men' (1985:173) but is aware of the contradictions that home offers. From this point on, despondency set in, a despondency that ended with his suicide and that echoes, in reverse, the suicide of Walter Benjamin who feared that he would not be able to leave his country, unlike Nakasa, whose exit permit from South Africa was a one-way ticket allowing for no legal return.

Much as Hausmann's broad boulevards and the rise of the department store spelled the end of the Parisian flaneur, as Baudelaire and Benjamin described them, so the stranglehold of apartheid and its spatial restrictions spelled the end of the urban freedoms Nakasa claimed for himself, though he was not there to witness these post-1964 changes, after his departure for America and subsequent suicide in New York. In recent years there has been a reemergence of the flaneur in different guise; more self-reflexive, certainly, but Mpe, and Vladislavić's readings of Johannesburg as urban text extend the nature of the urban flaneur into more sophisticated waters, reflecting the break-up of the previous white hegemony in Johannesburg's inner-city into a kaleidoscope of complex refraction.

Nakasa's flaneur, an incognito stroller, explores many boundaries, from the spatial constraints of Johannesburg and New York in the 1960s and their racial barriers, to literary borders, his anatomy of the urban landscape hovering between romanticism and modernism, between irony and realism. Recognition of his work, and his subsequent elevation to the position of media icon, are explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

MEDIA ICON

The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.

Milan Kundera. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

This chapter charts a narrative of discovery and loss, of memory and forgetting; an empirical survey of media response to Nakasa and the gradual building of Nakasa into an industry icon that takes cognizance of the implications in the creation of an unstable public identity. Varying interpretations of the key qualities in his life and writing culminate in Nakasa's elevation to the mythic, a metonymic figure representing ideals in South African journalism, after which there is decreasing reference to the original writing and authentic voice of Nakasa, which is in danger of being reduced to a formula by the fact of his iconic status. The creation of the Nat Nakasa Award for Media Integrity contains a degree of solipsism, coming as it does from an industry more given to creating iconic figures in the world of politics, sport and entertainment that is its business – figures like Mandela and Mother Theresa, Princess Diana, Marilyn Monroe – than to reflecting on its own world; though in the half-century since Nakasa's death television personalities and war zone photographers, like South Africa's Bang Bang Club, have created their own aura of fame and invincibility.

Roland Barthes, in his *Mythologies* (1973: 159) anticipated such issues in his comment that 'we cannot manage to achieve more than an unstable grasp of reality... we constantly drift between the object and its demystification, powerless to render its wholeness'. In discussing the physical attributes that identified the Abbé Pierre, and how the tonsure and beard are taken to 'signify apostleship and poverty' (ibid.:48), he

queries whether this ‘fine and touching iconography...is not the alibi...[used] to substitute...the signs of charity for the reality of justice’ (ibid.:49). Further, his description of the making of the myth of Stalin echoes much of the process involved in the making of the Nakasa myth, viz. ‘a meaning, which was the real Stalin, that of history; a signifier, which was the ritual invocation to Stalin, and the inevitable character of the ‘natural’ epithets with which his name was surrounded; a signified, which was the intention to respect orthodoxy, discipline and unity, appropriated by the Communist parties to a definite situation; and a signification, which was sanctified Stalin’ (ibid.:147). Nakasa is obviously no Stalin, in the sense of his personality, political belief or power; thus the signified, and possibly also the signification, would in Nakasa’s case apply to the award in his name and the official biography attached to it. Barthes’s arguments continue the contentious debate on the nature of the icon and its meaning, which derive from a long Judeo-Christian tradition of both rejection and idolatry, starting with the injunction of the second commandment to abhor graven images, and continuing with Calvin’s rejection of symbols and the Catholic hierarchy of angels and saints interposing between God and man.

Nakasa’s attributes have become a forest of signs with little reference to his writing, which is suffering from a degree of benign neglect and which has failed to capture post-apartheid public imagination or reader interest. The reissue of *The World of Nat Nakasa* has had disappointing sales, according to publisher Jonathan Williams of PanMacmillan, which bought the rights to the Ravan Press backlist. At the start of 2008 they had sold only 814 units of the 2005 Picador edition (out of a print run of 3,000) and 112 copies of the older Ravan edition. No information is available about earlier sales of the original Ravan edition as those records have been lost either in the take-over of Ravan, firstly by Hodder & Stoughton, and the subsequent sale to MacMillan; or during a fire in the publisher’s offices.³ It becomes apparent that though Nakasa was a staff writer on *Drum* magazine, he is seen as an outsider in this context, lacking the popular appeal accorded his peers in an increasingly romanticized perspective of *Drum*, Sophiatown, and the 1950s.

³ Information provided to the author in a telephone interview on 29 January 2008.

The decision by the South African National Editors' Forum in 1998 to name their prestigious award for media integrity after Nat Nakasa has had the effect of turning this unassuming writer into a media icon. This award was followed in September 2007 by the posthumous award to Nakasa of the State President's Order of Ikhamanga in Silver, a category of awards reserved for excellence in the fields of arts, culture, literature, music, journalism and sport; Nakasa follows previous recipients Alf Kumalo (2004) and Henry Nxumalo (2005), thereby ensuring his inclusion in an official post-apartheid pantheon of literary luminaries. Like many of the subjects in Nakasa's biographical vignettes, this award also has the effect of bringing to public notice writers who had previously been marginalized, of reversing the order of centre and periphery.

This chapter charts his progress into the limelight, from his exile in America and disappearance from public awareness, to the subsequent reclamation of Nakasa as a journalistic role model, and the varying receptions given to both the man and his writing over the past forty years.⁴

English and Afrikaans mainstream press have idealized him, applying the epithet 'liberal darling' to describe his adoption by white bourgeois society in the Johannesburg of the early 1960s, but it is to a large extent the alternative Afrikaans newspaper *Vrye Weekblad* that initiated his rediscovery and iconic status, comparing him with Ingrid Jonker and her contemporaneous suicide in July 1965. And while both English and Afrikaans press, particularly fellow Nieman recipients, have contributed to this iconic status through their enthusiastic if belated reception of his image and endorsement of his life and literary persona, some black journalists have criticised his liberal leanings. Not content with a resurrection of his work, they, and his family, also call for a return of his body from the United States to South Africa.

Nat Nakasa's status as a media icon is something of a paradox, possibly owing as much to the circumstances of his death as to his output. His work does not constitute a

⁴ The material used for this is not exhaustive, but is based largely on the 79 articles listed under the keyword 'Nakasa' in the SAMedia's online cuttings service, which trawls mainstream South African publications.

direct attack on the apartheid state of his time, his writing is not exclusively concerned with ‘speaking truth to power’, in the Quaker phrase; and his oblique social critique uses irony without necessarily exhorting his readers to action. Even so, he and his writing were seen as sufficient threat by the state, for unspecified reasons, for them to have refused him a passport. Instead they issued him with an exit permit that denied him a legal return to South Africa, thus forcing him into exile.

His metaphorical exhumation in the late 1990s is largely due to an awareness of his life and death by South Africans, starting with Afrikaans journalist Dana Snyman and followed by Nieman Fellows such as Mathatha Tsedu and Pippa Green, who had visited his grave in upstate New York. Green had been asked to research Nakasa’s life by filmmakers in South Africa (Lauren Groenewald for the *Native of Nowhere* documentary). In a feature for the *Sunday Independent* published in July 1990 she wrote ‘Today, as we struggle to recover from apartheid, it is as though Nat Nakasa has become the symbol of the loneliness of exile and of the struggle for dignity in racially oppressive societies’. South Africa was then looking for rainbow nation role models, and Nakasa seemed an appropriate figure, his often quoted credo of a broad South African identity predating by thirty years Thabo Mbeki’s 1996 ‘I am an African’ speech. Sandile Memela, writing in the *City Press* on 9 September 2001, remarks that ‘It is interesting to note that it was his [i.e. Nakasa’s] seminal piece ‘It’s Difficult to Decide my Identity’ that may have had a profound impact on President Thabo Mbeki and thus formed the basis for his renowned “I am an African” speech.’

For the first decade after his death in 1965 Nat Nakasa sank into relative obscurity, one of the many victims of the political struggles in South Africa where the focus had turned to more militant issues and writers, and when many, particularly black writers like Dennis Brutus and Alex la Guma, had had their work banned, or had gone into exile, or both. For many black writers like fellow exile Ntongela Masilela, Nakasa represented the tragedy of a life cut short:

Nat Nakasa was not to be so fortunate [i.e. as Lewis Nkosi]. He committed suicide at the age of 27 in his beloved Harlem. The suicide of Nakasa in 1965 destroyed what could have been an interesting and illuminating cultural project indicating the solid interconnections between black American culture and black South African culture: this was the project commissioned by Life magazine for Peter Magubane, an outstanding photographer, and Nat Nakasa,

to undertake a pictorial and essayistic study of the American South. That this would have been a true rendezvous with cultural destiny is indicated by the fact that the pictorial style evident in Walker Evans' photography of the black American cultural landscape and its people is continued today in Peter Magubane's great photography, capturing the disintegration of the Apartheid ideology. The interconnections between America and South Africa extend far beyond literary matters, encompassing also the fields of the performing arts, music, photography and others. The danger here has always been to guard against the cultural imperialism of white America. It may be that Ezekiel Mphahlele never fully recovered from the shock of Nat Nakasa's suicide, perhaps indicating to him the futility of the exile experience, and thus compelling him to return to South Africa a decade later. (Masilela 2007)

Nakasa's work and persona were revived in 1975 when, with prescience rare for the adversarial 1970s, Essop Patel, poet and subsequently a judge in Pretoria, edited a collection entitled *The World of Nat Nakasa*. This collection consists mainly of columns published in the *Rand Daily Mail*, as well as eleven pieces from *Drum*, one ('Mr Nakasa goes to Harlem') in the *New York Times*, one address on 'Writing in South Africa' given at the University of the Witwatersrand under the auspices of the English Academy of South Africa, and one short story, entitled 'My First Love'. This collection was published in 1975 by Ravan Press in Johannesburg, and includes tributes by Can Themba, Nadine Gordimer, Mongane Wally Serote and Kathleen Conwell. Together with the second impression in 1985, which includes a revised preface by Patel,⁵ and a third impression reissued by Picador in 2005, this is to date the sole published collection of Nakasa's work.

Sales of this collection of columns remain modest, but Nakasa's work, which ended with his death in 1965, was overshadowed in political and literary circles by the more militant Soweto poets who capture the aggressive *zeitgeist* of that time. Ironically, many of these poets were first published in *The Classic*, the literary magazine Nakasa founded in 1963, and in which he undertook 'to seek African writing of merit', with Volume 3, 1969 (edited by Nadine Gordimer and Audrey Cobden) including Mbuyiseni (Oswald) Mtshali, Njabulo Ndebele, Mongale Serote and Mafika Gwala. The first edition included Can Themba's short story, 'The Suit', destined to become a

⁵ Referring to Nakasa's rhetorical question, "Who are my people?" Patel comments that 'Nakasa's question will become pertinent only when a truly South African nation emerges in the future, when colour and race will be irrelevant. This may sound utopian but it is our only hope for avoiding civil destruction' (Patel 1985:xi).

classic in its own right, as well as Nakasa's own essay on 'Writing in South Africa'. Michael Gardiner comments that: '*The Classic* maintained a street-, township-, suburban- and political credibility that the others either lacked the capacity or the will to achieve. One key to this was a racial inclusiveness of material and a stance that addressed a black, non-racial perspective, without the assertions of principled radicalism or claims to being 'alternative' or 'experimental'' (Gardiner 2005).

The first written comment on Nakasa is by American John D. Gerhart, and it establishes Nakasa's defining characteristics and also marks the start of his status as a man apart. Writing a feature for *The Harvard Crimson* of 31 March 1965, he compares Nakasa's restraint to the flamboyance of fellow South African Ronald Segal: 'Next to Segal's virulent radicalism and brilliant repartee, ... Nakasa's questions and answers were hesitant, painfully searching. When Segal the white South African was cynical, Nakasa, the black South African, was sincere. When Segal lashed out in bitterness against the South Africans, Nakasa became more reflective, as if to ask whether South Africa didn't have enough bitterness already.' Gerhart continues in this vein, describing Nakasa as 'an editor of the South African magazine *Drum* and possible South Africa's leading African journalist', whose journalistic success became a poisoned chalice, and the reason for his exit permit. 'Should he try to return to South Africa, Nakasa faces trial and up to three years' imprisonment', writes Gerhart. Where Gerhart differs from subsequent accounts is in his inclusion of Nakasa's comments about his American experience and disillusionment, of how the photographs of a burned body of a Negro lynch-victim in a race riot 'upset me for weeks... I had never known such personal fear, not even in South Africa'.⁶

A decade later, Obed Kunene (1976) wrote a column for the *Sunday Tribune* entitled 'Was Nat a Black man who lost his way?' in which he discusses the circumstance and probable causes of Nakasa's suicide. Kunene describes himself as 'a close friend from school days through our entry into journalism 20 years ago', and he speculates that Nakasa experienced a crisis of identity when black Americans questioned his roots. The context in which Kunene writes is specific; 'eleven years ago, almost to the month' after Nakasa's suicide, his column was published in the

⁶ Ironically, *Drum* magazine had carried a photo feature of an American lynching; yet Nakasa reacted differently to these press images in America.

winter of 1976, after the school uprisings in Soweto that altered the political face of South Africa. This was the decade of rising Black Consciousness, of Soweto poets, of Steve Biko's death; in the United States, this was the era after the heady idealism of NAACP (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), after the 1963 Civil Rights march on Washington DC, and a time when Black Power and the Black Panthers were on the ascendant. Kunene, who in turn received a Nieman Fellowship in 1978, penned these comments after returning from a state-sponsored tour of the United States, and he describes how he 'listened with interest to lengthy expositions on the significance of a "Black identity" the "Black is Beautiful" concept and Black consciousness which resulted in Afro-Americanism' (Kunene 1976). Nakasa had written to Kunene at the end of his time at Harvard, describing his difficult interrogation 'at the hands of inquisitive "Negroes" as they were then called.' They asked him questions about his tribal background, about Shaka and other Zulu kings, and wanted to know how much of a "Black brother" he was. Nakasa's response, which Kunene reproduces, was a cry for help, asking Kunene to send him 'all those Zulu books written by R.R.R. Dhlomo. You remember how I used to hate reading them at high school? Please do me a favour. Send me any book you can find dealing with Zulu history and written by our people, like Mr Dhlomo' (ibid.). This regressive nativism on the part of Nakasa constitutes a reversal to a racial essentialism that he had earlier and specifically rejected.

In 1990 a resurgence of interest in Nakasa started with a brief review by Heidi Gibson of Theo Zindela's commemorative tribute to Nakasa, entitled *Ndazana: the early years of Nat Nakasa* (published by Skotaville); Gibson's review appeared in the *Natal Witness* on 23 May 1990. Zindela's brief account is to date the only published biography of Nakasa. Habimum Bharath Singh's M.A. thesis entitled *Nathaniel Nakasa – the journalist as autobiographer: a crisis of identity* also appeared this year, and is the first critical analysis of Nakasa's life and work. Its value is not only as a debut critique, but also because it includes material not in Patel's anthology, both biographical detail from Nakasa's early life in Durban, as well as assessments of several additional *Drum* articles. Singh's work seems to have attracted neither academic nor press comment, and I have purposefully distanced my own analysis from his in an attempt to avoid undue influence in what are inevitably overlapping studies.

The first iconic presentation of Nakasa comes in the *Vrye Weekblad*, the left-wing, alternative Afrikaans weekly paper that challenged the establishment views of mainstream Afrikaans press. On 20 July 1990 *Vrye Weekblad* ran a tribute to Nakasa and the Afrikaans poet Ingrid Jonker, who had both committed suicide in July 1965 – the first ‘twinning’ of two very different South Africans who had both envisioned a different sort of society, and who had both died too young to see this come to fruition. ‘Hulde aan Nat Nakasa en Ingrid Jonker: Bloed op ons ontbyttafel’ (‘Tribute to Nat Nakasa and Ingrid Jonker: blood on our breakfast table’) is the sensational headline for this article. In commemoration they carried a poem by Wilma Stockenstrom entitled: ‘By die selfmoord van jong skrywers: ter nagedagtenis van Ingrid Jonker en Nat Nakasa’, (‘On the suicide of young writers: in remembrance of Ingrid Jonker and Nat Nakasa’) and included Jonker’s most famous poem, ‘Die kind’ (subsequently selected to form part of Nelson Mandela’s inauguration address as South African President in 1994) and also the full text of Nakasa’s final *Rand Daily Mail* column, ‘Native of Nowhere’, which opens with the prophetic sentence ‘Some time next week, with my exit permit in my bag, I shall cross the borders of the Republic and immediately part company with my South African citizenship. I shall be doing what some of my friends have called, “taking a grave step.”’

Apart from Singh’s thesis, and a brief mention of Nakasa in *New Nation* in 1991, comparing the poetry of Mongane Wally Serote with the prose of Nakasa, there seems to have been a silence surrounding the man and his work for the next few years.

The next major recorded mention of Nakasa in print is in 1993 and is possibly the most important of all. This was when the end of apartheid was all but concluded, with negotiations for a settlement between the National Party and the African National Congress well under way, and the transition to a democratic future imminent. However the fault lines of this ruptured society were evident in the outbreaks of urban violence, particularly in the townships and also in rural KwaZulu-Natal, which made international headlines. These form the background to the 1993 article in question, which was written by an Afrikaans journalist, Dana Snyman, working for the popular magazine *Huisgenoot*, part of the giant Afrikaans publishing house NasPers (subsequently Media24) which by then had bought *Drum* magazine. Snyman’s feature was published in *Beeld-Deurloop*, supplement to Johannesburg’s Afrikaans

morning newspaper, and is headlined 'Graf sonder plaat, sonder niks in die stad wat nie slaap' ('Grave without plaque, without anything in the city that does not sleep'), and is the first major story in the mainstream press, and one that triggered the resurgence of interest in Nakasa, in the circumstances of his death abroad, and the anonymity of his grave. Nakasa would probably have enjoyed the irony of his literary disinterment by an Afrikaner in an early, and non-institutional stab at reconciliation.

In fairly racy prose Snyman recounts his quest for Nakasa's grave in New York, and it is a narrative redolent with the spirit of place, filled with the alienation of a stranger in a hostile city searching for some sort of salvation. His opening salvo is fashioned in the tough-guy style of Damon Runyon and Raymond Chandler: 'New York slaap nie. Ek sit voor my kamervenster op die dertigste verdieping van 'n hotel in Lexington Avenue, drink Budweiser, en dink aan Nat Nakasa.' (New York does not sleep. I sit in front of the window in my room on the thirtieth floor of a hotel in Lexington Avenue, drink Budweiser, and think about Nat Nakasa.) In the background, CNN television news details eleven deaths in Cape Town, ten in Thokoza, and in KwaZulu, one woman burnt alive. Snyman turns to that staple of researchers, the telephone book, for help from their information service in finding Nakasa's grave – this in a city with many graveyards. It seems an impossible needle-in-a-haystack search; 'ek bel inligting, vra die vrou waar sy dink 'n swart man uit Suid Afrika in hierdie stad begrawe sou word. Crazy, sê sy, maar gaan tog geduldig saam met my deur die lys begraafplase'. (I phone information, ask the woman where she thinks a black man from South Africa would be buried in this city. Crazy, she says, but continues patiently through the list of graveyards.) When she reaches Ferncliff, the telephone operator tells him that this is where Malcolm X is buried, and it has a section for black people 'daar is 'n groot gedeelte net vir swart mense. Oh, sê ek, apartheid. Go to hell, sê sy, en gooi die foon neer'. (There is a large section just for black people. Oh, I say, apartheid. Go to hell, she says, and slams the phone down) (Snyman 2000). Nakasa is segregated in death as in life, but this time in America.

Early in the morning, as the city starts to waken, Snyman makes his way to Grand Central Station and buys a ticket to Hartsdale, the nearest station to Ferncliff. He is accosted by a dodgy-looking veteran of the Vietnam war who calls himself Magic

Berry. ‘Cool, brother, sê hy toe hy hoor ek is pad na ‘n begrafplaas toe.’ (Cool, brother, he says when he hears that I am on my way to a cemetery.) Magic Berry then asks the obvious question ‘But why? Well, sê ek, I guess I am one of those fools who believe the possibility always exists that you can heal something in your soul if you undertake a journey to the appropriate spot.’ Snyman’s answer resonates with a sentimental appropriation of place, a belief that somehow finding this broken black body buried far from home will give meaning to Snyman’s own life, that the soil will be hallowed, that this foreign field will be transformed from American ground into African earth. This idea of hallowed soil has a long tradition, and is a concept used recently by performance artists in site specific installation works, such as choreographer Jay Pather’s use of the Constitutional Court to illustrate the bloodied history of slaves and other prisoners, using dancers who make their way up the African steps of the Court and into the former holding cells of the Johannesburg Fort. (This work was performed during the FNB Dance Umbrella in 2005). More specifically, graphic artist Karel Nel’s ‘Status of Dust’ exhibition deals with the concept of matter bearing testament to history. Nel explains this as ‘an exploration of the biblical notion of ‘dust to dust’ coupled with the forensic capacity of science to fingerprint dust to a particular site’ (interview with the author). Thus Nel uses debris taken from the site of the World Trade Center to create a homage to the events of 9/11, with two parallel obelisks that both mirror the proportions of those buildings and create the numeral 11. In these two works entitled Monument and Eleven ‘the matter itself contains the molecular memory of those events encoded in it’ (Dr Janet McKenzie, writing in the catalogue for ‘Status of Dust’ at Art First Contemporary Art, London, 9 November 2003-22 January 2004). And with ochre taken from Nelson Mandela’s birthplace at Qunu in Transkei, Nel illustrates the long ritualistic use of ochre in Africa.

In telling the story of Nakasa’s life to the Vietnam veteran, Snyman is recreating it for himself. Berry finds his own meaning, and his own scars in that time. “‘Shit”, sê Magic Berry en lig sy hemp op. Dis net littekens waar jy kyk. Hanoi, 1964’. (“Shit”, says Magic Berry, and lifts up his shirt. There are scars wherever you look. Hanoi, 1964.)

It is a two-hour walk from the station to the cemetery, and when he arrives Snyman is defeated by the sheer scale of the place, and the multitude of graves with no headstones, only copper plates laid flat on the ground. He is guided to the grave of Malcolm X, explaining to Chuck, his guide, that he is really looking for Nakasa, and he writes down the full name and place of birth – Lusikisiki. And there in an ageing receipt book is the record of Nathaniel Ndazana Nakasa, buried in grave 1302. They walk up and down the rows through soft rain, finally reaching a vacant spot: 'n graf sonder 'n plaat, sonder niks, net gras... Dis graf 1302' (A grave without a plaque, without anything, just grass...that is grave 1302.) Snyman's repetition of the sonorous, sombre 'sonder' echoes Ingrid Jonker's existential 'kind wat deur die wêreld reis sonder 'n pas'. Like Mahler's 'ewig, ewig, ewig', Snyman's song of the earth is without, without. Chuck offers to fetch a map and measure out the precise position of the grave. 'Toe maar, sê ek, toe maar, dis nie nodig nie, sê ek, dis nie nodig nie.' (Don't worry, I say, don't worry, it's not necessary, I say, it's not necessary) The mapping is over, for Snyman, and for South Africa.

Snyman's story is more than a dry historical reclamation of Nakasa; in searching for his own meaning he creates a metaphor for much of the Afrikaner self-examination of their identity within a broader African context that took place from the historic meeting in Dakar in 1987 between liberal (verligte) Afrikaners, and members of the African National Congress in exile. The sub-heading to Snyman's feature in *Beeld* (republished in 2000) states that a plaque was affixed to the grave after this story was translated into English; making this the first of a series of pilgrimages to both the burial site and the literary remains of Nakasa.

Later that year, Lew Clapp of the Nieman Foundation wrote in the *Harvard Crimson* about Nakasa's grave, referring to Snyman's research, and Clapp is credited with placing a plaque on the grave. Much of his article is repeated four years later by Mathatha Tsedu, then political editor of the *Sowetan* and recently returned from his own time at Harvard as a Nieman Fellow. First discussing the rich and famous like Malcolm X, Paul Robeson and Judy Garland who also lie in Ferncliff Cemetery, Tsedu describes his own visit to see Nakasa's grave. 'He lies in grave number 1038 in the Linden section of the cemetery', writes Tsedu, indirectly contradicting Snyman's number of 1302. 'A nameplate, put up in 1994 by the Nieman Foundation

of Journalism at Harvard University simply reads: ‘Nathaniel Nakasa May 12 1937- July 14 1965. Journalist, Nieman Fellow, South African. 1038.’” Tsedu continues, making the first of many subsequent appeals to bring back not just the memory of Nakasa, but also the body: ‘Considering the company Nakasa is in at Ferncliff, and the serenity of the surroundings, the attempt being launched by a group of South Africans to exhume him for reburial in South Africa might sound offbeat and difficult to understand. But then Nakasa was no easy man to understand either.’ Tsedu discusses the circumstances of his death, and that ‘At the time, South African exiles, including singer Miriam Makeba, who clearly understood the man’s desperate wish to return home tried to have the body flown to South Africa for burial, but the white racists would not have that either.... Dead or alive, Nakasa was not to return.... It is now possible’, comments Tsedu, adding that ‘A call has gone out to relatives to come forward and assist in efforts by journalists to bring Nakasa home, ‘concluding that ‘If indeed spirits live and souls wander about searching for peace, the reburial will ensure that Nakasa’s living spirit and wandering soul would rest where his ancestors lie, in the rolling hills of Lusikisiki’ (Tsedu 1997). This echoes Snyman’s romantic appropriation of earth and place in the creation of an authentic identity; but it is more a reflection of Tsedu’s views than those of Nakasa, whose preference for urban life, and refusal to accept a tribal designation are major characteristics of his writing.

Four further articles on Nakasa were published in *Beeld* between 1997 and 2005, and in 2007, two appear in *Die Burger*, *Beeld*’s sister paper in the Cape and former standard bearer of pure Afrikaans. Nakasa is represented as an accessible figure, a black man who accommodated not only white people, but who specifically mentions Afrikaners in several columns, and someone who can be adopted as a role model. Significantly, like Snyman, Christi van der Westhuizen’s 1997 feature in *Beeld*, entitled ‘Nat Nakasa se talent laat hom ‘n slagoffer van Suid Africa word’, (‘Nat Nakasa’s talent made him a victim of South Africa’) also breaks new ground. She quotes Mathatha Tsedu, who on returning from his own year at Harvard on a Nieman Fellowship, raises for the first time the possibility of having Nakasa’s body returned to South Africa. A lawyer in Massachusetts had offered free legal advice, according to Van der Westhuizen, adding that Miriam Makeba and other friends had wanted to bring the body home at the time of Nakasa’s death, but the government of the day had refused to allow this. (An indication of Makeba’s standing with Nakasa is that

‘[Nakasa] was to have written a biography of Miriam Makeba. . . . At Nat’s funeral ceremony Miriam Makeba sang Zulu laments, and Abdullah Ibrahim (Dollar Brand) accompanied the Zulu hymns sung by the congregation’, according to Essop Patel in his revised preface (Patel 1985:xii.)

Christi van der Westhuizen’s account deals with the facts and suppositions surrounding Nakasa’s death, though she erroneously labels him the first black South African journalist to have received a Nieman Fellowship (this honour went to Lewis Nkosi). Her brief article is significant for its attempt to achieve journalistic balance and a rounded picture of Nakasa by carrying a wide range of viewpoints with differing perspectives on his life, work and death. The overall impression is one of great affection for Nakasa, but what is missing in these descriptions is detail, as image replaces reality, and the mythmaking starts. Her interviews are with white writers who were themselves icons at that time, Nadine Gordimer and Sir Laurens van der Post (though his image has been tarnished since the publication in 2001 of JDF Jones’s biography, he had, according to correspondence in *The Classic* files, encouraged Nakasa to leave South Africa and had offered financial support in Britain); their endorsement adding to the aura around a protégé and increasing an awareness of his identity within the white establishment.

Raising questions about the nature of Nakasa’s suicide, Van der Westhuizen quotes Van der Post who speculates that the reason why Nakasa’s death has been so moving is because of its synchronicity with Ingrid Jonker’s suicide in Cape Town in July 1965. At the time of their deaths, i.e. in 1965, Van der Post had approached William Plomer, his old friend and former partner on literary journal *Voorslag*, with a request that he immortalise these two in a poem. ‘[hy] het die skrywer William Plomer gesoebat om te dig oor die identiese tweeling (wat) noodlot gebore is.’ The resultant elegy, Plomer’s ‘The Taste of the Fruit’, pairs these two sensitive writers as joint victims of their time, both having, in Michael Chapman’s words, ‘defied the restricting codes, respectively, of racial discrimination and Afrikaner Calvinism only to commit suicide in despair at their isolation’ (Chapman 2003:182). Of Nakasa, Plomer writes ‘Now he is free in/A state with no frontiers’, further emphasising the concept of place and space as a defining trope in Nakasa’s image. Originally published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, this poem added to an international

perception of both Nakasa and Jonker. It was reproduced in *The Classic* volume 2:1 of 1966, and is attached at the end of this chapter.

The crux of Van der Post's Jungian analysis is that neither the creative feminine nor the masculine is allowed to live in the South Africa of that time. Juby Mayet, a journalist who had worked with Nakasa, is quoted by van der Westhuizen as saying that his suicide was ' 'n helse skok. Ek kon dit nie glo nie. Hy was vriendelik, kon jou ore van jou af praat. Hy was nooit vervelig nie. Hy was net nie daardie sort mens nie' (his suicide was a shock. I could not believe it. He was friendly, could talk the hind leg off a donkey. He was never boring. He was just not that sort of person). These perceptions are inconsistent; journalist Joe Thloloe, who knew Nakasa and his artistic friends like Can Themba and musician Kippie Moeketsi, described them as talented but with a strange destructive urge. Survivor guilt seems to have been another possible reason for Nakasa's depression; Mathatha Tsedu, who in 1997 had recently returned from his own time as a Nieman fellow at Harvard, quotes other (unnamed) Nieman students of Nakasa's year. According to them, Nakasa had become increasingly reserved, and in an interview (unspecified) said that he felt guilty, as if he had betrayed those he had left behind. Tsedu added that for Nakasa, it was important to belong somewhere; the bright lights of New York made him feel uncomfortable, and he longed for the community he had left behind, his friends, his home. The result of this was the campaign started by Tsedu to bring back Nakasa's remains; and this attempt at the physical reclamation of Nakasa belongs as much to Tsedu as to any other champion.

Adding to the Afrikaans awareness of what was by now becoming an iconic figure, both a symbol of non-racial possibility and a hero who had died in the field for an ideal, At van Wyk, former history lecturer at in the University of Pretoria, wrote a brief feature outlining the facts of Nakasa's life and death for the *Beeld* insert, *Insig*. This was published in January 1999 in the column *Historiese Voetnoot* under the headline: 'n Sêd, sêd storie' (Historical footnote: A sad, sad story).

This followed a feature in the *City Press* in November 1998 by Lebona Mosia, head of Technikon Gauteng Arts Faculty, claiming African ownership of Nakasa. His article is headlined *Glory in a painful past: let us follow in the footsteps of the giants*,

and forms part of a series on black doyens of journalism. He comments that ‘despite our wretched past we have a rich cultural heritage. Among the giants is Nat Nakasa.’ This article is significant for two reasons, one biographical, one literary. Mosia (1998) quotes Nadine Gordimer:

On hearing of his death, Nadine Gordimer, who knew Nakasa very well, said: “He was a very sensitive person, and the terrible thing is that nobody seemed to realise what was happening to him in New York. He was having a full-scale nervous breakdown and it was just ignored or regarded as an amusing eccentricity. His death was a tragedy. But whether it had to do with the family history of mental instability – his mother has been in mental hospitals virtually all of his life – or whether it had to do with what the Americans call “culture shock” we will never know.”

And Mosia also mentions a little-known fact that ‘Nat Nakasa lived with Es’kia Mphahlele in Orlando West shortly before he left the country. Mphahlele recalls: ‘my wife tells me he did look pretty unstable mentally but he was functioning. He was writing some good stuff, excluding the *Rand Daily Mail* articles which were flabby, they didn’t have any grit in them. But he was functioning.’ As former fiction editor of *Drum*, Mphahlele’s concerns were, and are, more literary than journalistic; this partly explains his negative sentiments about the quality of Nakasa’s columns.

By this time, i.e. the mid-1990s, South Africa was looking for ‘rainbow nation’ icons, public figures in the mould of Nelson Mandela, free from bigotry and sectarian affiliation, and who would represent a broad South African identity. Gordimer’s perception of Nakasa as a different sort of South African fitted this new age image, and from then on Nakasa’s literary exhumation began in earnest. Pippa Green’s lengthy feature, published in the *Sunday Independent* in July 1999, endorses the image of a man victorious in defeat and foregrounds Nakasa’s history for readers in the mainstream English press in South Africa: ‘Today, as we struggle to recover from apartheid, it is as though Nat Nakasa has become the symbol of the loneliness of exile and of the struggle for dignity in racially oppressive societies. His story reaches across boundaries,’ she concludes. Earlier in her feature she quotes another South African icon, Helen Suzman, who together with Nadine Gordimer had recommended him to Harvard, as saying that ‘It is rare indeed to find an African who has managed to throw off any racial resentment as has done Mr Nakasa’ (Green 1999).

Green's visit to Ferncliff Cemetery to find Nakasa's grave retraces Snyman's footsteps, though she does not acknowledge her Afrikaans predecessor. She writes: 'Until five years ago there was nothing to mark the place where Nakasa lay buried, far from home. Nothing until Lew Clapp, who worked for the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University, a shy man, large in physique and heart, who died last year, tracked down the grave and organised the plaque.' (Already, there is some contest about the discovery of the grave.) Green adds, 'I am here because, at last, South Africans as a whole – not just journalists, or black journalists or Nieman Fellows – will learn about the loss we suffered. Filmmakers in South Africa had asked me to do some research for a film on Nakasa's life. I am here also because this year I have been a Nieman Fellow at Harvard.' Her interviews include comment from Joe Thloloe, another former Nieman Fellow 'who visits Harvard and tells me: "We want to bring Nat back home, to bury him at home."'

For the next few years there is a steady stream of comment on Nakasa, including two features in the *Sunday Independent* on 25 July 1999, a week after Green's feature in the same newspaper. Both Sipho Nakasa (a relative of Nat Nakasa) and Lwandile Sisilana (a researcher at the Constitutional Court) are concerned with issues of identity. Sipho Nakasa, in an article, or letter, headlined 'Nat a living symbol of unenchanted free world', responds directly to Green's 'moving commemorative tribute' by questioning the motives and circumstances for his illustrious relation's (putative) suicide, and whether exile and the web of racial strife were sufficient conditions 'to lead Nat to consider suicide as a way out'. Instead, he suggests that Nakasa's writing tells a different story about his last days in America, and that:

His article on Harlem and his visit to the Deep South tell me that Nat may have come to an unexpectedly shocking realisation that he had left the slums of Johannesburg only to run headlong into similar problems in Harlem and the Deep South. He may have come to realise that black-white racial strife was a universally inextricable problem of the 20th century.

There is more speculation on the nature of racism in America, but this feature concludes with the affirmative statement that:

I'm meant to celebrate the resurrection of Nat as someone who chose the journalistic-cum-literary field as his arena of struggle. He chose the pen as his barrel and the word as his bullet.... He also chose, remarkably, humour and political satire as his kernel for telling the truth about the follies of modern human life. With his short-lived youthful feat of imagination, Nat resurrects

himself as a living symbol of an enchanting free world that is symbolic of a boundless human spirit. (S. Nakasa 1999)

Sisilana's letter on 25 July 1999 is headlined 'Nakasa: a view most fail to see: South Africans can learn from Nat Nakasa that one's identity is ultimately one's own business', and after some complex discussions on the nature of 'true self', he concludes:

Nakasa's problem here is very South African: other Africans are automatically Africans, but South Africans need somehow to qualify. And for Nakasa the qualification was that a South African should have something in common with other Africans. Isolationism at work! One detects the same isolationism in people who suggest we should stop using the word "African" and simply call ourselves South Africans. The sense in which African renaissance people use the term "African" is not the old one, which was really shorthand for "black", excluding coloureds and Indians. They use it to signify our connection with the continent. (Sisilana 1999)

The following month, Nieman fellow Joe Thloloe continues the debate around Nakasa in his column *Third Eye*, which appeared in the *Sunday World* on 8 August 1999 under the heading 'In celebration of a life and hard-won freedom'. 'Watching the rushes of a documentary on Nat Nakasa – a young South African journalist who died in exile in 1965 – thrust me back in a time warp to the early 1960s and the heyday of *Drum* magazine and the *Golden City Post*', writes Thloloe, adding that 'The documentary is produced by TML Television for Print Media South Africa (PMSA), the Nieman Society and the South African National Editors' Forum to celebrate our hard-won media freedom, as well as the life and times of Nakasa.' Its screening was firstly to the PMSA's annual general meeting on September 20, then again at a cocktail party on October 18 'when the second Nat Nakasa Award is made, and will air on e.tv on October 19 – our national Media Freedom Day' (Thloloe 1999). Thloloe describes the documentary thus: 'Some of the survivors from that era – from Jim Bailey to Arthur Maimane – and people who knew Nakasa and that era, or were touched by him in one way or another, are interviewed in the documentary. Also interviewed is the first recipient of the Nat Nakasa Award, Jon Qwelane.' After a

brief description of Nakasa's life, exile, and death, and the vibrant writer's circle of which he was part in Johannesburg, Thloloe comments that:

The story of his last minutes is controversial, with some saying he was depressed by life in exile, and others believing he was pushed out. The truth is the National Party government had banished him into a lonely wilderness, because it did not like what he wrote. It was the ultimate in censorship; a practice this country should never return to.

This intelligent documentary is possibly the high point in Nakasa criticism, encompassing as it does a wide range of interviews with his peers, friends and fellow journalists in South Africa and in the United States, and including footage in which Nakasa discusses Bantustans, as they were then known, in an interview on American television. His elevated status was assured, and the release of Groenewald's documentary drew short-lived attention to Nakasa through reviews that endorse his status as a liberal. In this context, liberal is used to encompass the qualities defined in the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (10th ed., 2001), ranging from a respect for individual liberty and an acceptance of differing opinions, to an endorsement of moderate political reform, and of free trade and a market economy. It has none of the pejorative, Marxist connotation of liberals as capitalists engaged in worker exploitation. There is also an implicit acceptance of what Isabel Hofmeyr, writing during the time of contesting liberal/radical ideologies in 1979, describes as 'a liberal historiography that analyses South African society in terms of racial dynamics only' (1979: 92), endorsing her assertion that 'the term liberalism in South Africa has come to assume a wide range of meaning which includes ideas of tendermindedness, paternalism, and in certain senses, any vaguely left-wing political activity' (ibid.: 89).

Heather Hogan in the *Mail & Guardian* of 22 October 1999 remarks that 'Nakasa was resented by his black peers for speaking of reconciliation while they tried to stoke the fires of hatred and anger', concluding that 'His story remains a tragedy, the tale of a man ahead of his time – a man who died for knowledge, truth and freedom of expression' (Hogan 1999). Janet Smith in *The Star* of 4 November 1999, in a review entitled 'His soul goes marching on' describes him as:

A man of many gifts, his dazzling insight and creativity calls urgently from the pages today, reminding us of how sparse our journalism is in 1999 and how much we have still got to learn about its craft and its beauty.... Yet, perhaps the most important reason why his death is still mourned is because of the

profound contribution Nakasa would have made to South Africa's more recent political life.

Inevitably, some cracks have appeared in the process of sanctification, and perhaps Nakasa is more complex than these bland offerings would suggest. Rumours of problems with drink and insanity surface about Nakasa's time in America, when he was far from the nurturing support of home and friends in Johannesburg, including white liberal intelligentsia like Allister Sparks and Nadine Gordimer. Sparks remembers that Nakasa had sent him a frantic telegram after the (Nieman) programme had ended, saying "Please phone me –it's urgent"; but with no phone number or return address Sparks was unable to respond. "I was desperately trying to contact him when I heard next day of his suicide", said Sparks (interviewed by the author). Tsedu remarks that though Nakasa had his own apartment and enough freelance work to remain solvent, he 'still wanted to go home to his beloved Africa. In fact, he wanted to go back so badly he brooded for days, and turned to drinking' (Tsedu 1997). In an article unrelated to the release of the video, Harry Mchunu, writing in the *Independent on Saturday* (23 October 1999) and photographer Peter Magubane defend Nakasa's reputation against comments made by Sylvester Stein, who had edited *Drum* magazine in the 1950s, and whose history of *Drum* had been published as *Who killed Mr Drum?* Stein quotes Bloke Modisane, another *Drum* reporter, as saying that 'Nat was in a drunken depression, all alone in New York, couldn't get anything published'. In contrast, Peter Magubane points in another direction: 'When he was at Harvard University, Nat kept saying he saw ghosts, strange things and wanted to slaughter a goat for his ancestors. We were all amazed because he had never been superstitious' (Mchunu 1999).

Nakasa critique tends to focus on his survival techniques in South Africa, and on the circumstances of his death. There is very little comment on the nature of his exit permit, or on why the then government should have reacted so viciously to a moderate writer – nor has the truth come to light in the aftermath of apartheid, probably because the questions have not been asked of the authorities, nor at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Abbey Makoe quotes Mathatha Tsedu as saying that 'He (i.e. Nakasa) left South Africa on an exit permit that did not allow him to return home.... It was a terrible blow for the naïve Nakasa who, on applying for the

fellowship, wrote to curator Dwight Sargent: “As I have never been active in politics except as a journalist, I expect no difficulty in obtaining a passport from the SA government””. Tsedu added: ‘The regime did not share Nakasa’s views on how they should approach his application nor his optimism, and turned down his application – without even saying why.’ Siphso Nakasa comments that ‘My family knows well that before and after Nat left the country, he had been under police surveillance.’ Nakasa had written several critical pieces about the Bantustans in general, and the Transkei in particular, and this may have been the cause of government disapproval. Barney Mthombothi remarks that Kenneth (Nakasa, Nat’s brother) ‘credits Nakasa’s merciless caricature of (Kaiser) Matanzima as a malleable buffoon at a time when the government was trying to project him as a credible black leader as the real reason for its refusal to grant him a passport to go abroad’ (Mthombothi 1997), though this comment is not substantiated by Nakasa’s published columns. His vignettes on the Transkei (‘The isolated visitors’, ‘The contented Transkeians’, and ‘Meet the new MPs’), are less than flattering in their exposé of the homeland’s sham independence but Matanzima is a shadowy figure who refuses to grant an interview to the press, and the only time Nakasa sees him is at Mandela’s house, playing with Mandela’s daughter on his lap. It is more the members of the Transkeian Parliament who are presented as malleable buffoons.

After the release of the video, Nakasa’s image fades from public view, apart from a perfunctory story by Gert van der Westhuizen in *Beeld* on 18 October 2000, entitled ‘Nat Nakasa herdenk met prys vir dapper journalistiek’, that covers old ground. It is only on 9 September 2001, two years later, that Sandile Memela writes in the *City Press* of ‘The man who was at odds with his identity: Nat Nakasa did not conform to the stereotype of the hard-drinking and self-destructive black journalist’, in the most critical analysis of Nakasa’s life and work after Serote’s comments. Memela rightly observes that ‘None of his (i.e. Nakasa’s) provocative and politically conscious contemporaries rooted in an authentic African experience like Can Themba, E’skia Mphahlele, Bloke Modisane or even Henry Nxumalo, have had their profiles or memories raised like that of Nakasa’s.’ He continues:

few people are surprised that a journalist and writer whose creative energies were channelled towards helping misguided white newspaper readers has been elevated to legendary status. It is an open secret in journalistic circles that Nakasa accommodated white liberal tendencies which are, and always have

been, a prerequisite for an African media practitioner to rise in prominence, influence and power.

(This assertion touches much of the debate about ownership and independence in the press and mass media in post-apartheid South Africa, from controversies about the SABC's political bias to black editorship of major newspapers such as the *Sunday Times*.) Significantly, Memela is the first to use the rainbow nation image in relation to Nakasa. He notes that:

The late Nakasa was a prophet of the Rainbow Nation which espoused peaceful co-existence between black and white before former archbishop Desmond Tutu made it fashionable... [despite the fact that] in the race-obsessed and politically overcharged era of the 1960s, many of those who read his work could not reconcile his outlook with the realities of oppression and exploitation on the ground. Instead, many of his contemporaries saw him as an invention of white liberals and a sellout.'

And Memela speculates:

Nakasa may have been haunted by the perception that he was a white liberal darling. For this reason he launched the literary magazine *The Classic* to follow a path that would not only see black journalists write prolifically but own the media they used. *The Classic*'s main aim was 'to encourage those writers with causes to fight for, committed men and women who look at human situations and see tragedy and love, bigotry and common sense for what they are'.

Memela concludes with a synopsis of Nakasa's departure and death, and the rhetorical comment: 'But his spirit lives on, although restless, among liberal-minded blacks and whites who want to use his significance to plant a seed for a Rainbow future' (Memela 2001).

Memela takes a harder black consciousness line in an undated column for *Chimurenga online*, entitled 'Volunteer racism', and which also deals with issues of 'internalised racism among black media professionals... Even in the era of the African Renaissance, black journalists who espouse Black Consciousness are condemned and ridiculed for being 'angry, frustrated and outdated' people', continuing:

Not long ago, there was a debate among some black journalists about the revival of Nat Nakasa as a legendary South African journalist. The debate centred on Nakasa being recognised as a great journalist simply because he aspired to whiteness. Although as a black man he was wronged by white racism, and finally forced to abandon his motherland, he sought to devalue

urban black Africans and their experience and embraced a white editorial slant in his commentary. Yet because he was a major hit in white liberal circles, he has been exhumed from the grave and made an icon of black journalism. (Memela 2002?)

This is the strongest extant criticism of Nakasa; yet, like many white commentators, Memela fails to identify the irony which is part of Nakasa's coded technique, his ambivalent inversions and reversals of situation, his sly mimicry, and his humane concerns; nor does he comment on the commanding strength of the Nieman fellows, and that Nakasa is part of this particular journalistic elite.

Further discussion about Nakasa veers between his principles and literary output, and his mortal remains. In October 2002 Saki Macozoma, then chief executive of Nail, the corporate owners of the *Sowetan*, gave the main address for the Nat Nakasa award in an article headlined 'Integrity "the essence of good journalism": fairness and humanity in the media is not always recognized and rewarded'. He remarks 'It is clear from the choice of the person and life of Nat Nakasa that we assigned a specific meaning to the concept [of integrity]. What comes through for me is the attribute of courage. Wally Serote characterises Nakasa as a rainbow man before the rainbow was allowed,' comments Macozoma, and 'That was courage because he stood the risk of being shot by both sides.' This recognition of the bravery of Nakasa's middle path is an endorsement of Nakasa as an appropriate figure to represent an award for integrity and courage.

But many black commentators remain concerned more with Nakasa's body than with his literary reputation. The *Sunday Tribune* (26 October 2003) carries an obituary to Joseph Nakasa, the younger brother of Nat Nakasa, who died in Umlazi, Durban and was buried at Pamerton, a village near Lusikisiki. Through his brother, Joseph came to know some of the prominent black journalists of the sixties and seventies, the so-called *Drum* writers. When Can Themba went into exile in Swaziland, Joseph followed him. The report notes that 'Joseph's younger brother Moses had left to join Nat in the US before his death. He has not been seen since. The family does not know whether he is dead or still alive. Joseph's niece [sic] Siphonakasa said that his pre-occupation before his death was searching for the whereabouts of Moses, and saving money to bring Nat's remains back home. "He

died without fulfilling his wish”, Sipho said.’ Two year later, on 18 March 2005, Ndivhuwo Khangale writes in *The Star* that his (i.e., Nakasa’s) only surviving sister, Gladys Zanka Maphumulo, said that although she acknowledged that Nakasa’s work and name had not been forgotten in media circles, the greatest privilege for her would be to see his grave and pay her last respects, with his nephew Dennis Nakasa further commenting: ‘We would have liked his body to be exhumed, but it would be very costly. We don’t have the money and that’s why we are now resorting to only visiting his grave.’

Two months later, in the *Sunday Tribune* of 12 June 2005, Chris Makhaye reports on a statement by KwaZulu-Natal Premier Sbu Ndebele, that:

the bodies of a Durban journalist and a veteran anti-apartheid hero – both of whom died in exile – will be returned to Durban to be buried here later this year. (The two in question are Nat Nakasa... and Moses Mabhida, an ANC anti-apartheid stalwart who died in exile in Mozambique). Ndebele said Mabhida’s body would be returned in September while that of Nakasa would be fetched later this year.’ (Makhaye 2005)

Thus Ndebele plays Priam to Nakasa’s Achilles, as an ageing father (or in this case, elder statesman) seeking to retrieve the body of the young hero fallen abroad, in order to provide the proper ritualistic conclusion to death. In July 2005 this leitmotif is repeated by Sibusisi Ngalwa, in a *Sunday Tribune* article entitled: ‘And closing the wound of Nat Nakasa’s death’, quoting Gladys Maphumulo as saying that ‘The Nakasa family have never accepted the theory that Nat’s death was a suicide’, concluding that the Department of Foreign Affairs was facilitating the return of Nakasa’s remains. In September 2005 Kevin Ritchie, reviewing the third edition of *The World of Nat Nakasa*, published by Picador Africa, calls Nakasa ‘a shining star in the constellation that was black journalism of the 1950s.’ He concludes by stating that ‘Half of the proceeds of the sale of this book will go towards funding the exhumation of his remains in New York and their re-internment in South Africa.’

And there the matter, and the body, rest, as far as public announcements are concerned. In September 2007 the State President’s Order of Ikhamanga (Silver) award was given to Nakasa, for ‘excellent contribution to journalism through which he challenged the system of apartheid and racial stereotypes, striving for a non-racial non-sexist and democratic South Africa’, and it refers to his grave in the ‘rolling hills

of Westchester County’, not in the rolling hills of Pondoland. This award concludes with the statement that:

Nakasa is lauded throughout the journalism fraternity as a pioneer, not just for his talent as a writer, but also for his attitude and the way he lived his life. Finding racism abhorrent, Nakasa refused to be shackled by the racial prejudices of the white-dominated state. His fate is seen as particularly tragic because he was a victim of an often venerated group – that of those who lived through the struggle in exile. Nakasa’s fate highlights the difficulties of those destined to struggle in a foreign country, being unable to claim to belong anywhere.⁷

It is Nakasa’s humanistic statements and status that garner further comment; Guy Berger, winner of the Nakasa award in 2006, describes Nakasa as ‘a supremely insightful observer.... Nakasa’s journalism spoke across South Africa’s great divides. He avowedly embraced fellow writers with causes to fight for and who could also perceive a common humanity in their stories.’ (‘The legacy of Nat Nakasa’, *Mail & Guardian*, 19 July 2006). Kirby van der Merwe, writing in *Beeld* (19 May 2007) in feature entitled ‘Ons eerste reenboog mens ... maar sonder SA was hy ‘n man van nêrens’, (‘Our first rainbow man...but without South Africa he was a man from nowhere’) draws the parallels, again, between Ingrid Jonker (widely known in Afrikaans literary circles) and Nat Nakasa, who remains for many an enigma. This article retraces the well-worn path through the known facts of Nakasa’s life and death, with Van der Merwe describing him as a rather tame and dutiful son of South Africa, commenting ‘Nakasa is in die verkeerde tyd gebore. Hy was sensitief, ‘n denker. Hy was altyd onberispelik geklee. Hy was trots. Hy was anders.’ (He was born in the wrong time; he was sensitive, a thinker. He was always faultlessly dressed. He was proud. He was different.) Above all, it is Nakasa’s comments about Afrikaners that are quoted by Van der Merwe, by Charles Naude (in an earlier column, also in *Beeld*, entitled ‘Nat Nakasa-prys se dubbele ironie: geskiedenis van Groot Trek was deel van hom’, published on 24 October 2002), and again by Lizette Rabe. Rabe, head of the University of Stellenbosch Department of Journalism and a member of the judges’

⁷ Sandile Ngidi was commissioned to write this obituary, which, though brief, carries the authority of an official history. It excludes not only adverse criticism, but also any mention of another of Nakasa’s achievements, which was (according to Tom Hopkinson (1962:263)) the suggestion that the Sharpeville shootings in March 1963 should be honoured with a national day of mourning. As editor of *Baobab*, a South African journal of new writing launched in Autumn 2008, Ngidi inherits Nakasa’s mantle.

panel of the annual Nakasa prize, includes three of Nakasa's features that mention Afrikaners: 'It's Difficult to decide my Identity' ("My people" are South Africans. Mine is the history of the Great Trek...); 'Afrikaner youth get a raw deal'; and 'The Cruelty of Closed Eyes' (Afrikaner people... noted for their religious outlook on life"), in her own feature on the annual award, entitled "Nat Nakasa: 'native' van nêrens" (*Die Burger*, 24 March 2007). Hers is a more searching assessment in which she grapples with some of the issues around the man after whom this sought-after prize has been named, commenting on the irony that a stateless person, as he became after leaving South African shores, was the first to write about an inclusive South African nation, adding that the government refusal to give him a passport is one of the many charges against apartheid. She does not discuss the possible irony in any of Nakasa's comments, preferring to end her column with a sceptical take on Gordimer's idealistic comment that 'he was the beginning, not the end', by remarking: 'Of gaan die tyd bewys dat Nat Nakasa inderdaad naief was?' (will time prove that Nakasa was indeed naïve (as his black brothers had claimed)?). It is not clear, from Rabe's opaque comment, whether her disillusion is with Nakasa or with South Africa. Her comments herald a new scepticism, based not only on the success and failures of a non-racial South Africa, but also on a re-appraisal of Nakasa's idealism. She also anticipates the resurgent debate around Black Consciousness-based segregation within the journalistic community, and the emergence of the Forum for Black Journalists which, after its exclusion of white journalists from its interview in February 2008 with Jacob Zuma, the new President of the African National Congress, was labelled by columnist Justice Malala (2008) as 'a betrayal of the ANC's founding principles, and a perfect storm of gross hypocrisy and intellectual bankruptcy'.

And in a column written in *The Weekender* in April 2007, Mlungisi Zondi looks at some of the bigger political issues of the time and questions whether Nakasa was a cold war pawn, an unwitting victim of CIA manipulation in the great game of communism versus capitalism that was being played out on the world stage in the middle of the twentieth century (see below).

Nakasa's writing is characterised by balance, humour, irony and restraint, qualities frequently sacrificed in the heated debates and extremes of the oppositional apartheid era. The extent to which he 'speaks truth to power' can be measured against two sets

of criteria; the ancient Greek principles of free speech, as recast by French philosopher Michel Foucault, and those established by his South African peers for the award that bears his name.

In a paper entitled 'Fearless Speech', Michel Foucault describes 'four questions about truth telling as an activity – who is able to tell the truth, about what, with what consequences, and with what relation to power – [which]] seem to have emerged as philosophical problems towards the end of the Fifth Century around Socrates, especially through his confrontations with the Sophists about politics, rhetoric, and ethics' (2001:170). He further defines the practitioner of parrhesia as 'someone who has the moral qualities which are required, first, to know the truth, and secondly, to convey such truth to others' (ibid.:15). In addition, 'the parhesiastes is someone who takes a risk' (ibid.:16), and Foucault cites the example of when:

a philosopher addresses himself to a sovereign, to a tyrant, and tells him that his tyranny is disturbing and unpleasant because tyranny is incompatible with justice, then the philosopher speaks the truth, believes he is speaking the truth, and, more than that, also takes a risk (since the tyrant may become angry, may punish him, may exile him, may kill him. (ibid.)

In Nakasa's case, the tyrant (in the collective sense of the National Party government) expressed anger by punishing him with exile. His crime, such as it was, was that of telling the truth. This accords with the SANEF criteria, as below:

Criteria for the Nat Nakasa Award of interest:

The award, which is underwritten by Print Media SA's Media Freedom Committee and the Nieman Society of Southern Africa, is named in memory of prominent black consciousness writer and journalist Nat Nakasa. Nakasa was the first black columnist on a 'white' South African newspaper, and used his position at the Rand Daily Mail in the 1960s to expose racial prejudice and black subservience. Nakasa's bravery and balanced commentary won him a Nieman Fellowship in the United States of America, where he finally succumbed to depression and committed suicide in 1965. SANEF's Award for Media Integrity seeks to build on Nakasa's philosophies and recognise South African media practitioners who have

- *Shown integrity and reported fearlessly*
- *Displayed a commitment to serve the people of South Africa*
- *Tenaciously striven to maintain a publication or other medium despite insurmountable obstacles*
- *Resisted censorship*
- *Shown courage in making information available to the public*

The award is open to journalists, editors, publishers, managers or owners – irrespective of whether they work for community/national newspapers, magazines, the Internet or any other print medium.

Nakasa's qualities accord with these criteria to a large but incomplete extent: on the first count, his integrity is incontrovertible; his values are an unfailing commitment to a humanistic and non-racial perception of South African society, to an acknowledgement that even his enemies are human. Wally Serote, in his homage entitled 'The Nakasa World', remarked that 'he had the time and energy to say to us, "There must be humans on the other side of the fence; it is only we haven't learned how to talk." We replied "Humans? Not enough"' (Serote 1985: xxxi). Can Themba repeats this exchange, in 'The Boy with the Tennis Racket', (Themba 1985: xviii). Nakasa expressed his belief that 'it is important for our writers to illuminate all aspects of our life from a central point in the social structure. That is, whatever their colour or views may be, they must accept their presence in the country as members of one community, the South African community' in his address on 'Writing in South Africa' to the English Academy of South Africa at the University of the Witwatersrand (Nakasa 1985:190). This perception is further endorsed in his criticism of Sarah Gertrude Millin's *God's Step-Children*, 'if she had been close to Coloureds at all, then she failed to see the human beings beneath the skin' (ibid.: 191).

As to fearless reporting, Nakasa's colleagues on *Drum* magazine are probably more fearless reporters – Henry Nxumalo, particularly (labelled Mr Drum for his exposé of the potato farms of Bethal), and Bloke Modisane and Can Themba who wrote about the hypocrisy of many Christian churches, of different denominations, whose

congregations were aggressively segregated. Nakasa is best known for his writing on Johannesburg, but his reporting at large includes a continuation of Nxumalo's investigation of conditions on potato farms, as well as various aspects of rural poverty, deprivation, illness and the start of the removals and resettlements intrinsic to separate development. Nakasa on the other hand inveigled his way into a government building in Pretoria, through a door for whites only. He records his experiences in roving columns consisting more of comment than of reportage, his chief weapon being irony. The effect of his optimistic take on a spatially divided world is to anticipate a shared space, rather than to appropriate it. Memela's comment is that 'his global perspective infused with middle-of-the-road views expresses in his column, directed at the white readership of *The Mail* (i.e. the *Rand Daily Mail*) gained him a substantial following' (ibid.).

Displaying a commitment to serve the people of South Africa is not a conspicuous quality in Nakasa's work, nor is the idea of service, with its overtones of civil or religious duty. But his statement on his own identity redefines (male) South African identity, by incorporating a broad sweep of South African history, albeit male history, from 'the Great Trek to Gandhi's passive resistance in Johannesburg, the wars of Cetewayo and the dawn raids which gave us the treason trials in 1956' (Nakasa 1985:160).

The Classic, the publication Nakasa tenaciously strove to establish, is a literary magazine, not a vehicle for investigative reporting. Far from having any insurmountable obstacles, Nakasa had support from luminaries such as Nadine Gordimer, Barney Simon and Philip Stein, and funding, albeit of a limited nature, from the Farfield Foundation. It is highly unlikely that he had any knowledge of the tainted origins of this funding, which came from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which also funded the British literary journal *Encounter*. This information originally surfaced in the late 1960s, according to Barney Simon (1980: 78), when the Farfield Foundation was revealed as being CIA funded. Simon adds that he (as subsequent editor of *The Classic*) decided to 'stay with their support' as they had not in any way interfered with editorial policy. A decade later, Simon records that conservative journalist Aida Parka '“exposed” the *New Classic* as an instrument of the 'pernicious' Farfield Foundation, ignorant, I must take it, of the fact that Farfield

was extinct long before the New Classic was even dreamt of' (ibid.).⁸ Mlungisi Zondi revived this scandal in *The Weekender* in 2007, and extracts of his analysis follow.

'Nakasa, a Cold War Pawn', by Mlungisi Zondi. Extract from the Weekender Review, 14 April 2007.

His host on the day of his death, described in a 99-word obituary in the New York Times as a "friend", was John "Jack" Thompson. Thompson's "philanthropic" foundation contributed to Nakasa's expenses at Harvard and, two years earlier in 1963, helped fund *The Classic*, a literary magazine Nakasa co-edited in SA. But he was certainly no friend of Nakasa's...while he portrayed his relationship with Nakasa as that of a benefactor, he was a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) spy.

According to 1966 New York Times reports and 1967 articles in *Ramparts*, a left-wing magazine, the philanthropy of the Fairfield Foundation, of which Thompson was an executive director, was a farce: a money-laundering operation the CIA used to channel funds to "deserving" anticommunist causes. That much Thompson, a former literature lecturer at Columbia University, admitted in an interview with Frances Stonor Saunders, author of *Who Paid the Piper: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*: "We knew who was deserving and who wasn't. We were trying to avoid the standard democratic crap. We wanted to reach our friends and help them, the people who agreed with us."

But did Nakasa "agree" with the CIA? How does one understand how Nakasa, whose middle-of-the-road views on race relations betray a naive obliviousness to political bigotry, edited a literary magazine? Why target him?

From the CIA website: "The Congress for Cultural Freedom [CCF] is considered one of the CIA's more daring and effective Cold War covert operations. It published literary and political journals such as *Encounter*, hosted dozens of conferences bringing together some of the most eminent western thinkers; and even did what it could to help intellectuals behind the Iron Curtain."

The foundation sponsored the CCF until 1967, when Fairfield's CIA links were revealed in *Ramparts*. It propped up publications *Africa South* and *The Classic* in SA, Nigeria's *Black Orpheus*, and Uganda's *Transition*. Whiz-kid editor Rajat Neogy, who launched *Transition* in 1961, said on discovering his magazine was funded by a CIA front: "My first reaction was shock, later turning into a two-month depression that came out of a feeling of being smeared by something one neither knew about nor was prepared for."

⁸ After Nakasa's departure, Barney Simon was nominally editor of *The Classic* which last appeared in 1971; Siphso Sepamla edited 5 editions of the *New Classic* from its inception in 1975 -1978 (Gardiner: 2005).

It's a matter of calculated guesswork how the editors of the more than 20 CCF-funded journals and magazines worldwide — one of them soft, sensitive Nakasa — reacted on hearing the news.

English professor and former exile Ntongela Masilela writes in his essay, *The Political Forms and Cultural Processes of a Particular South African Exile*, that black writers who left SA for political reasons ended up playing pseudo-politicians. Perhaps this flirtation with politics rendered people such as Nakasa vulnerable to the CIA.

Masilela writes: "One of the real tragedies of apartheid had been to force outstanding literary luminaries to pretend they were professional politicians because of opposition to this fascism, when in fact they had no sensibility whatsoever of politics."

For Nakasa, exile could have had moral appeal, an odyssey whose wheels had been set in motion by apartheid bureaucrats. (Zondi:2007)

Zondi's contention about Nakasa is guilty of some anachronism; Nakasa died in 1965, so could hardly have been aware of an exposé in the *New York Times* in 1966, nor that in *Ramparts* in 1967 (author's note).

Whether or not Nakasa was inadvertently a Cold War pawn, which Zondi asserts, would not necessarily have made any difference to the content of *The Classic*. In all probability, Nakasa was selected as a worthy recipient of American funding because of his liberal views, and there seems to have been no attempt at editorial pressure. Thompson, however, was also a professor of literature at Columbia University, and he did give Nakasa valid literary advice regarding the realistic style and lack of imaginative material on the part of black writers. *The Classic* also featured some of the first black urban poets in South Africa, from Oswald Mtshali to Sipho Sepamla, and Mongane Wally Serote. Nadine Gordimer, commenting on Nakasa's editorship of *The Classic*, remarked that 'There was not enough money for the venture and there were endless practical difficulties – yes.... As for money, he managed as best he could with what there was' (Gordimer1985: xxii) – indicating that the funding was far from generous.

The next condition in the SANEF award list is that of resisting censorship, and here there is little evidence for or against Nakasa whose coded messages seldom tackled the government of the day in a direct attack. However the fact of his exile, by virtue of his exit permit, had the effect of censoring him, though his National Party critics

might well have answered that choice of whether or not to take the Nieman Fellowship, and leave the country for good, was his own. The mystery remains as to why Nakasa was marginalized when the South African government could have used him for propaganda purposes. Both Nadine Gordimer and Allister Sparks express deep regret, in interviews with the author, for their role in persuading him to leave; feeling, with hindsight, that Nakasa would have survived intact into a new South Africa, and would have made a meaningful contribution during the troubled interim years as well as in the post-apartheid era.

Nakasa's courage lay more in interpreting circumstance than in making information available to the public. As with fearless reporting, his is not an investigative mind, though his comments on traditional leaders in the then South West Africa, Rhodesia and Transkei all reveal a deep scepticism of the official line. His views of the Bantustans, as recorded in a live interview contained in the video *Native from Nowhere*, are similarly sceptical. He did, however, bring a different view of life to the attention of the largely white readership of the *Rand Daily Mail*.

In this narrative of discovery and loss, Nakasa's memory becomes, paradoxically, one of forgetting, and his image is in danger of becoming as remote and irrelevant as a war memorial, a victim of the inherent dangers of iconolatry, of the veneration of a symbol and the increasing distance between signifier and signified. His name is synonymous with one of the most prestigious awards for journalism in South Africa, but the low sales of his work attest to the lack of contemporary acquaintance with his writing. The extent to which he writes against the apartheid grain, exploring his own survival techniques and the anomalies and perceived injustices in society at large is testament to a degree of 'speaking truth to power', even though this is challenged by his critics. The humanistic concerns in this writing include not only a broadly inclusive South African identity that embraces black and white people, mentioning particularly the Afrikaners; his reporting at large includes descriptions and critique which challenge both the ruling, apartheid-based hegemony of the Afrikaner and a later Black Consciousness perception of Nakasa as a collaborator, though his presentation is within a liberal rather than a radical Marxist framework. The scenarios he describes and the portraits he paints of that time are discussed in the following chapter on Nakasa as auto/biographer.

THE TASTE OF THE FRUIT

William Plomer

(In memory of the poet Ingrid Jonker, who drowned herself by night at Sea Point, Cape Town, in July 1965, and of Nathaniel Nakasa, the South African writer, who died by suicide in the United States in the same month)

Where a dry tide of sheep
Ebbs between rocks
In a miasma of dust,
Where time is wool;
He is not there.

Here towers of green water
Crash, re-shaping
White contours of sand,
Velvet to a bare foot;
She is not there.

Where pride in modesty,
Grace, neatness,
Glorify the slum shack
Of one pensive woman;
He is not there.

Where one fatherly man
Waited with absolute
Understanding, understanding
Hands full of comfort;
She is not there.

Where sour beer and thick smoke,
Lewdness and loud
Laughter half disguise
Hope dying of wound;
He is not there.

He, who loved learning,
Nimbly stood up to
The long years in training
He is not there.

Where she was thought childlike
She carried the iron
Seeds of knowledge and wisdom;
Where they not flower,

She is not there.

A man with no passport,
He had to leave to exile
Himself from the natural
Soil of his being,
But none to return.

She, with a passport,
Turned great eyes on Europe,
What did she return to?
She found, back home, that
She was not there.

Where meat-fed men are idling
On a deep stoep,
Voicing disapproval
Of those who have 'views',
She is not there.

Where with hands tied
Some wrestle for freedom;
Where with mouth stopped
Some ripen a loud cry;
He is not there.

Where intellectuals
Bunch together to follow
Fashions that allow for
No private exceptions;
She is not there.

Now he is free in
A state with no frontiers
But where men are working
To undermine frontiers,
He is not there.

"My people", in anguish
She cried, "from me have rotted
Utterly away." Everywhere
She felt rejected;
Now she is nowhere.

Where men waste in prison
For trying to be fruitful
The first fruit is setting
Themselves dug for;
He will not taste it.

Her blood and his
Fed the slow, tormented
Tree that is destined
To bear what will be
Bough-bending plenty.

Let those who will savour
Ripeness and sweetness,
Let them taste and remember
Him, her and all others
Secreted in the juices.

CHAPTER THREE

AUTO/BIOGRAPHER

The poet enjoys the incomparable privilege of being able, at will, to be himself and an other. Like those wandering souls seeking a body, he enters, when he wants, into everyone's character.

Charles Baudelaire. *The Parisian Prowler*

The compound epithet auto/biographer is particularly apt for Nat Nakasa, encompassing as it does the dual and intertwined sense of self and other evident in his columns and vignettes. Nakasa constantly defines himself in terms of conversations and chance encounters with unnamed persons – the passing trade of the promenade and the peripatetic observer – and it is through social contact rather than topographical description that his literary persona is realised. His endorsement of the traditional African humanist wisdom that a person is a person through other people preceded the post-apartheid popularising of this concept. In her tribute to him, Nadine Gordimer comments that: 'Nat was a good talker and had the unusual ability to tell an anecdote in such a way that he himself was presented as the "feed", and the bright lights illuminated the character of someone else' (Gordimer 1985: xxiii). Nakasa is reticent about personal detail, preferring, as with his two city impressions, a sketch to a portrait, and relatively little is recorded about his life other than the exterior facts.

Critical assessment of Nakasa has focused mainly on his own life and the circumstances of birth and death, from Lusikisiki to his teenage years and education in Durban. He makes passing reference to the fact that 'being city bred, I did not begin life as a herd-boy' (1985: 149), and that 'When I was a schoolboy I used to spend my holidays earning two shillings a day in the gardens of white families in Durban. I also carried bundles of washing on my head to the flat-dwellers in town' (ibid.: 151). Subsequently he led a nomadic existence during his working years in Johannesburg when his major work was produced, before leaving South Africa on an exit permit to take up a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard, and thereafter committing

suicide in New York. This critical assessment consists of the journalistic comment discussed in the previous chapter on Nakasa as media icon, endorsed by the SANEF award in his name; and two biographical studies, Theo Zindela's brief survey of his life, *Ndazana: the early years of Nat Nakasa*, and Habimum Bharath Singh's 1990 dissertation entitled *Nathaniel Nakasa – the journalist as autobiographer: a crisis of identity*.

Nakasa himself opens barely a chink into his interior life, and his emotional and intellectual inclinations remain the subject of much speculation. This is particularly true about the circumstances surrounding his suicide; he left no letter, and apart from the remark that 'I can't laugh any more – and when I can't laugh I can't write' (Patel 1975:xii), gave no reason for ending his life. Conspiracy theorists have suggested that apartheid killed him, directly or indirectly; but it is generally accepted that he took his own life and jumped from a seventh floor apartment of his own accord, because of a deep depression. Opinion varies as to the cause of this depression, and whether this was induced by alcohol, or a reaction to America, and a deep disillusion about its racist nature and what he perceived as 'the real tragedy of the American negro' (Conwell 1985: xxxv). His depression has also been attributed to a genetic problem, possibly (like Bessie Head) inherited from his mother, who had suffered from a permanent post-natal depression after the birth of her youngest son, and remained incarcerated for the rest of her life – a fact to which he does not allude, but which is mentioned anecdotally. Can Themba (1975:xix) describes Nakasa's family: 'Their mother was in Sterkfontein Mental Hospital, unable to recognize even her sons. Nat talked little about his mother, but once when I had gone there with him, he broke out into bitter, scalding tears. I had not been there when he saw his mother, but I guessed that it was a gruelling, cruel experience.' Lebona Mosia (1998) (quoted in the previous chapter) refers to Nadine Gordimer's comments on Nakasa's death: 'He was a very sensitive person, and the terrible thing is that nobody seemed to realise what was happening to him in New York. He was having a full scale nervous breakdown and it was just ignored or regarded as an amusing eccentricity. His death was a tragedy. But whether it had to do with the family history of mental instability – his mother has been in mental hospital virtually all his life – or whether it had to do with what the Americans call 'culture shock' we will never know.' Obed Kunene (1976) attributes Nakasa's suicide to 'a question of identity, or lack of it'. The most widely

accepted cause of his depression was the fact of his exile, and that his one-way exit permit disbarred him from returning home, to South Africa. This profound sense of displacement and nostalgia would encompass all the previous conditions, as a malaise of identity. Es'kia Mphahlele describes his own experience of exile in America, as a condition in which 'I have abandoned myself to the tyranny of place, and as long as I do not have that sense of place, as long as I cannot remember a place by its smells and the texture of its life, I cannot create a sustained literary work out of it. South Africa, and Africa generally, still claimed me.... Indeed, exile had become for me a ghetto of the mind' (Mphahlele 1982:71). Nakasa would probably have shared these sentiments.

Not only the reason for his suicide remains a secret; Nakasa has left very little trace of personal or intellectual relationships. His reading preference is not known; Nadine Gordimer, in a telephone interview with the author, speculates that his reading was fairly limited, and in her published tribute to Nakasa, 'One man living through it', comments: 'He was a clever young newspaperman but had no literary background or experience', and 'He had read no poetry outside a school primer' (1985 pp xxi-xxii). Joe Thloloe, in a personal interview with the author, commented that Nakasa, like the other *Drum* writers, probably preferred the literature of the Harlem Renaissance to that of Britain. Aggrey Klaaste confirms this preference, remarking that: 'Nat Nakasa was a friend of Lewis Nkosi and the two displayed the same ambivalence in being black writers and scholarly liberals. Nat and Nkosi wrote scholarly articles for *Drum*. They also read books they poached from the Wits university library, and immersed themselves in black American writing and the works of Russian novelists' (Klaaste 1988: 5-6). One of the few clues to literary influence lies in his speech on 'Writing in South Africa' (based on a talk given at the University of the Witwatersrand under the auspices of the English Academy of South Africa) where he comments that

The Africans I know, who have taken any interest in writing, spent more of their time reflecting on the work of people other than South African writers. There are, obviously, exceptions like Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer and others in whose work the African is represented as something larger than a functional being.... During the last days of Sophiatown, nearly ten years ago, you were more likely to walk into a conversation centred around James Joyce or John Osborne or Langston Hughes instead of local names... To me, the trends which developed in Sophiatown are important because Sophiatown is the only place I know where African writers and aspirant writers ever lived in close proximity. (Nakasa 1985: 188)

His ambivalence towards South African writing is ‘the direct result of a sense of grievance, a feeling of rejection by the powerful hierarchy of the country’s culture’. This meant that ‘South African white writers, save for the exceptions, belonged to another camp’ (ibid.: 188-189).

The thread running through this address is the tension between experience and representation, particularly in a society as divided as South Africa then was. ‘How can the white writer penetrate the African’s life, which is one of an outlaw, in order to gain greater insight into his situation?’ (ibid.: 193) is the question he repeats in his speech, though he does not seem to see the irony of reversal here, and avoids commenting on the fact that he himself, as a black writer, had attempted to penetrate white society in order to gain insight into the forbidden cloister of this politically dominant group, and of their situations and their lives.

There is also the assumption that anecdotes written in the first person reflect his own experience. Yet this is not necessarily so, there being a thin line between fact and fiction; also, as J.M. Coetzee asserts, ‘all autobiography is *autre*-biography’ (2006: 216), using Paul de Man’s argument that once the historical self is portrayed in writing, it becomes a substitute for self. David Attwell comments that ‘Theories of autobiography since the 1970s... have done away with hard distinctions between autobiography and fiction... we have come to accept that despite autobiography’s supposedly greater reliance on memory, all life writing invents its object, whether or not it declares its fictionality’ (Attwell 2006: 214). In addition to the problems of the authentic representation of self, Nakasa may also have incorporated contemporary fictions, variations of urban legend prevalent at that time and subsumed them as his own, or have fabricated incidents to prove a point – Seyla Benhabib’s ‘web of narratives’ (Benhabib 1992:198).

As Stephan Meyer comments, ‘The relationship between fact and fiction, truth and metaphor, and its particular inflection in auto/biographical accounts is another much debated feature of the genre’ (2006: 62), an extension of the Aristotelian debate as to whether history or art is a better purveyor of truth (ibid.: 54). This is particularly so with Nakasa’s anecdotes about his own supposed experiences with various

Afrikaners, where he explores the chinks in prejudice, uncovering a propensity for humane action beneath a thin apartheid skin. These are, most notably, the ‘talented Afrikaner painter’, a supporter of Dr Verwoerd’s apartheid policy, who had saved a newborn African baby found abandoned on a pavement’ (in ‘Johannesburg, Johannesburg’: Nakasa 1985: 7). And in ‘The cruelty of closed eyes’, he describes the truck driver who was unaware of how cold his African servant was on the back of a lorry, until Nakasa’s ‘friend’ pulled the truck over and said: “that man at the back is freezing, why don’t you put him inside here.” “Ja”, he said readily, “Laat hom maar hier inkom”” (ibid.: 155).

In this transition from feature to fiction, Nakasa and his fellow *Drum* writers employ similar techniques to those of New Journalism to transform a bald description of Johannesburg of that time into a romanticized view that has achieved near mythical status. Adrian Hadland, in a feature for *The Weekender* entitled ‘New Journalism’s SA roots’ (2006), claims that this was achieved particularly by Todd Matshikiza, and that by ‘the smashing of conventions... in the use of slang and in the prominence of what Wolfe called the “hectoring narrator”, the *Drum* generation bore the classic signs of a writing revolution that was to change the world’. Describing the ‘stylistic technique of the Drum writers... as an early phase of that movement’, Hadland lists the four elements defined by Tom Wolfe as the hallmarks of New Journalism: ‘scene-by-scene construction, or the use of images to depict a story; the inclusion of the full dialogue; the description of events through the eyes and mind of a character; and the capturing of details so vivid they formed a metaphor for the article itself’.

Nakasa’s coffee-bar anecdote in ‘Johannesburg, Johannesburg’ contains the vivid detail, the dialogue, and the hectoring narrator of New Journalism but this is exceptional, and although he was in the *Drum* brotherhood, he was something of an outsider, and his prose is more remarkable for its restraint, and its Anglo-Saxon *sang-froid*, than for a robust radicalism. Klaaste (1998: 5-6) comments that ‘Nakasa was plainly not suited to be a writer in South Africa in the sixties. While he tried to fit into the boisterous, cynical and often dangerous life led by reporters, he kept a civilised distance’.

What has received little attention to date is Nakasa's concern with the other, rather than with self, and with how his own identity is reflected in the mirror of Johannesburg and its people. His choice of subject and his entrée into different levels of society make him a man of that time, much like the subject of O'Henry's short story of the Man About Town, who in searching for a definitive image, an archetype both urban and urbane, failed to recognize these characteristics in his own identity. The focus of this chapter, then, is on the portraits Nakasa paints of others, rather than of his own life; a focus that is for the most part on the public rather than on the private persona, on the social rather than the psychological, and in which his selection of fact and shaping of narrative provide both direct and oblique comment on pertinent social issues.

Nakasa's need as a working journalist to meet deadlines of time and space results in work whose brevity lacks the depth of full-length psychobiographical studies such as N. Chabani Manganyi's works on Mphahlele (*Exiles and homecomings: a biography of Es'kia Mphahlele 1943-1980*), and on Gerald Sekoto (*A black man called Sekoto*). Just as Nakasa's work was produced at speed, so it was also destined for instant consumption and there is none of the self-reflexive solipsism that characterises later, post-apartheid auto/ biographies or current discourse on this topic. What Nakasa's work lacks in depth, it compensates for in breadth, providing a wide social coverage, largely of personalities in Johannesburg at a particular time, that is the late 1950s and early 1960s. The resultant collective history is one that relates not to the family, nor strictly to the nation state, but to a regional identity, not only of socialites in Johannesburg but also including politicians in Lesotho, Transkei, and Namibia. This is a broader view than the narrow focus on Johannesburg with which he is largely associated; and this broader perspective endorses his romantic assertion of an inclusive South African identity ('Mine is the history of the Great Trek, Gandhi's passive resistance in Johannesburg, the wars of Cetewayo and the dawn raids which gave us the treason trials in 1956' (Nakasa 1985:160)), discussed in the following chapter.

This stance, which frees Nakasa from a narrow sectarianism, enables him to hear and to speak for different communities, and he displays an open-minded approach to the subjects of his interviews, frequently deconstructing official propaganda to present

a different truth, as with the visiting Transkeian and Rhodesian politicians, although the legal restrictions of the time inhibited some of his interviews. Psychologist N. Chabani Manganyi, in discussion with Thengani Ngwenya, makes the point that ‘Autobiography and biography are about voices and from time to time you have to ask yourself which voice is speaking’ (2006:165). The issue of voice, so significant in biographical writings, is subject to specific external constraints in Nakasa’s writing; he was prohibited by law from quoting Winnie Mandela, then a banned person, and by customary law from quoting the moSotho Princess Masentla before her marriage. PAC youth leader Philip Kgosana, interviewed by Nakasa in *Drum*, April 1961, is quoted thus:

When I decided to get out, the atmosphere in Cape Town was tense. I was in a cell at the Roeland Street Jail, Cape Town. I told the authorities that I wanted to go home to Pretoria as Christmas was soon to come. They wouldn’t let me. My whole plan for quitting could easily collapse if I was confined to Cape Town...[what follows is the train journey to Johannesburg]. I had promised to be there (i.e. Special Branch HQ, Aquila Building Pretoria) shortly after four in the afternoon. But I was delayed and at the last minute Tom Hopkinson the Editor of *Drum*, drove me in his car to the police [what follows is his escape to Swaziland]... next stop Maseru. The only newspaperman I actually spoke to at all in Maseru came from *Drum*, although still again, a variety of newspapers reported having seen me.

These words appear to be verbatim but may have been edited by Nakasa, as there is no indication of how Kgosana’s experience was relayed and transcribed.

The theoretical framework for this discussion comes largely from the essays contained in *Selves in Question: Interviews on Southern African Auto/biography*, edited by Judith Lutge Coullie, Stephan Meyer, Thengani H. Ngwenya, and Thomas Olver, who in their introduction, challenge the ‘monological notions of authorship and the subject that are associated with European Modernity’ (2006: 45). Newspaper features are not admitted as a genre in this study, though verbal portraiture of the kind Nakasa produced has stylistic similarities with the visual, photographic studies in the chapter (in the fore-mentioned text) entitled ‘Group portrait: self, family and nation on exhibit’, in which Stephan Meyer interviews Paul Faber, Rayda Jacobs and David Goldblatt. The signifying practice in newspaper columns and feature articles shares with photographs a brevity of selection; the representational nature of word and image inviting speculation of the context and world beyond the frame, a deferred meaning dependent on reader reception and interpretation. Nelson Mandela’s foreword to the

catalogue for this photographic exhibition and its accompanying text, includes the assertion that the stories of ordinary folk and the reconstructions of their memories, provide ‘a more intimate understanding of what lies behind the official versions of history’ (Faber 2003: 5).

Lewis Nkosi’s comments on Es’kia Mphahlele’s *Down Second Avenue*, that the ‘will to truth’ is the effect of his ‘sparse uncluttered prose... making the reader forget that there is an author’ (Nkosi 1990, quoted in *Selves in Question*) could equally apply to Nakasa, even if the brevity of Nakasa’s biographical pictures is due in large part to their mode of publication, in his columns in both *Drum* and the *Rand Daily Mail*.⁹ Designed to capture the reader with a short attention span, in either a magazine or a morning read, they place the subject within the social context of which Nakasa himself is part, in the city he made his home and which is his preferred milieu. When he ventures out of Johannesburg to investigate rural conditions, his style changes to that of journalist-cum-social scientist, with evidence-based opinion in the form of names, dates, statistics – how much, how many, when, where, how and why, specific information, rather than impressions. Neither prescriptive nor judgmental, his diffidence may be seen as weakness or collaborationist but may also mirror the uncertainty of his youth, as he was in his 20s when most of this work was produced. It also represents a school of neutral, factual reporting. Though Nakasa remains for the most part restrained in his prose, his richest work is in close and individual interview and remembered or recreated dialogue; when he uses a more factual approach, such as ‘We travelled over 700 miles’ in ‘Give them their daily bread’ (1985:79), his accounts of malnutrition and disease in the rural areas of Zululand and Sekukuniland, this results in a bleak anonymity which lacks a sense of personal engagement.

Grouped together under the rubric ‘Personalities and profiles’, Patel has collected eleven cameo studies by Nakasa that highlight personalities who were well known in

⁹ Benedict Anderson’s description of the ‘profound fictiveness’ of the newspaper ‘as cultural product’ is apt in this context. Anderson analyses the ‘essential literary convention of the newspaper’ as ‘an imagined linkage (which) derives from two obliquely related sources...calendrical coincidence...(and) the relationship between the newspaper, as a form of book, and the market... The obsolescence of the newspaper on the morrow of its printing – curious that one of the earlier mass-produced commodities should so prefigure the inbuilt obsolescence of modern durables – ...creates the...almost precisely simultaneous consumption (‘imagining’) of the newspaper-as-fiction’ (1991: 33-35).

the Sophiatown and Soweto of his day. Unlikely to have been included in the social pages of the mainstream press, they come from the demi-monde of a segregated Johannesburg, though their names have survived longer than he might have expected; a centering of the periphery that has come full circle. Of these, three individuals have cast long shadows – Winnie Mandela, The magic piper (penny whistler Johnny ‘Spokes’ Mashiane) and legendary boxer Ezekiel ‘King Kong’ Dhlamini.

Nakasa’s feature on this seemingly invincible pugilist provides the background to King Kong, South Africa’s first indigenous musical, a work whose ownership, creation and interpretation have been hotly contested in recent years (see Titlestad 2004: 85-104). With libretto and music by Todd Matshikiza, and input from white impresario Harry Bloom this tragic love story, with its Porgy and Bess overtones, was a commercial success in South Africa and together with its South African cast, toured abroad to Britain and the United States. This is why Miriam Makeba, the leading female singer in King Kong, and her then husband Hugh Masikela, were in America in 1965, at the time of Nakasa’s death. Nakasa published his tribute to the boxer in 1959, to coincide with the premier of this musical in Johannesburg. ‘Right now, King Kong’s gorilla face is on red posters pasted on to walls, his name splashed in the papers and pasted on to car windows. A musical elephant-size job with over 50 men and women on the stage is being made on King’s life. The estimated cost of the opera’s production is 6,000 pounds.’ (Nakasa 1985:120) It is a trumpeting promotion for this musical, and he further introduces his subject thus:

Ezekiel ‘King Kong’ Dhlamini – that rugged, ever-unkempt giant with the iron muscles of a Durban rickshaw puller – is back in the limelight. Within two years a legend has emerged round the man who threw himself into a dam rather than face the grey sameness of prison life. (ibid 1985:119)

Like Nakasa, Dhlamini moved from Durban ‘to the wild, stabbing, over-populated Johannesburg’, where he tried his hand first at gambling, and then found his way to the sparring rooms at the Bantu Men’s Social Centre’ (ibid.:122). From here on Nakasa writes as a sports commentator, of Dhlamini’s first days at the gym, his reluctance to wear ‘cushions’ round his wrists, his first successes, training, weight-loss, his victims and victories. Social context is incidental, but telling; in one incident, ‘King Kong cornered one of his challengers (Sam Langford) at the Durban Railway yards...the poor fellow was busy sweating away at a day’s work when King

Kong confronted him at the railway...“But how can we fight here in the yard at work?” Sam protested. “These things are done through promoters and managers and trainers. And it must be in a ring”...King Kong was already weaving and bobbing in the yard when a third party – a fellow worker of Sam’s – intervened.’ This working-class milieu is further illustrated in the next anecdote, when Nakasa describes how ‘For weeks on end he (i.e. King Kong) would travel long distances to Pretoria and the mine dumps on the Reef. Pedi tribesmen would pay his fare and offer him stakes if he came to their open-air, barefist fights. The lonely champ would line them all up and knock them out one by one’ (ibid.:123). Apartheid’s chinks, like Dhlamini’s, appear towards the end of his life; ‘With a 14-pound weight advantage over Simon Greb, King Kong toyed around with his opponent... It became a foregone thing the King was going to crush Greb any time. But then King Kong started dancing about, swinging his arms like a policeman during a drill session’, and Greb rushed in, knocking the King flat on his back. ‘This was to be the turning point in King Kong’s life’ and his end in boxing ‘came in a secret sparring session in Johannesburg with the white man-mountain, Ewart Potgieter, [who] sent the black giant twice over the rope’ (ibid.:124). Nakasa does not comment on the legality of this fight, and whether black and white boxers were breaching segregationist sports laws in their encounter; and this non-committal acceptance is an extension of Nakasa’s own non-racial crossing over.

From then on Dhlamini’s life declined into a vortex of violence. As a bouncer in ‘gangster-infested dance-halls’, he stabbed a knifeman to death, and then killed his girlfriend, Maria Miya, whom he accused of infidelity. Policemen at the scene opened fire on him, but he survived three bullets in his body only to face trial, conviction, and a sentence of twelve years in jail. ‘Even the trial of King Kong was not to be without its touch of the fantastic: he begged the judge to give him a death sentence instead of jail, ...commenting that “I’m not bothered at all about my girl’s death. My only worry is that by the time I come out of jail I will be too old to fight”’(ibid.:125).

Despite the obvious differences between the violent man of action and a contemplative writer, there are similarities between Dhlamini’s and Nakasa’s own life, in Romantic intimations of immortality, and the sense that there was a brief flash

of glory, of splendour in the grass in a burst of creative genius reflecting the spirit of the time, before burning out in obscurity, with a self-inflicted finale. ‘It was the dull, disciplined life of jail he must have hated’, comments Nakasa of Dhlamini’s incarceration. ‘In the outside world he was constantly surrounded by crowds of people. People who talked about his fame and his might. This admiration was a part of his life. Not the grim-faced crowds, like the bunch of hard-labour convicts who saw him hurl his life away; saw him drown himself in a dam at the Leeuwkop Farm Jail on April 3, 1957’ (ibid.:125). Nakasa leaves the story of this flawed giant there, without interpreting his life and death, unlike Harry Bloom, who comments that ‘his [i.e. Dhlamini’s] death reinstated him as a popular hero’ whose ‘stubborn refusal to compromise became an inspiration to Africans struggling for emancipation’ (Bloom 1961:13).

Dhlamini is not the only action man Nakasa writes about, and the dangers of life on the edge seem to act as a magnet for *Drum* journalists; but the gentle giant Peter Reynolds Makhubo is a far cry from the egotistic King Kong, and his few comments on his time in the South African Army during the Second World War illuminate a little-known area. In a feature entitled ‘The Bouncer’, Nakasa starts with an anecdote about how Makhubo saved the life of Miriam Makeba in a Johannesburg concert hall when ‘four thugs pressed revolvers against her head...no-one in the audience dared make a move to help Miriam [but] one man saved her. That was Peter Reynolds Makhubo, the most courageous doorkeeper in South Africa’ (ibid.:109) who forced the gunmen to surrender their arms. Makhubo’s strength is in breaking up fights, not in starting them, and from this scene-setting introduction Nakasa moves into a compact mini-biography, which he then amplifies with detail and dialogue:

At 44, Peter Makhubo is one of the most daring men on the Rand. He has been controlling crowds as a doorman since 1929. He once killed a man with a punch and stayed eighteen months in a death cell. During the war he went with the army to Egypt and Italy. He knows enough about love, bleeding heads and death to write a book.

Johannesburg’s violent past is evident in Makhubo’s comment that “‘Standing at the door nowadays is an easy business”, says ‘Bra’ Pete. “You should have been around in the early days or a few years ago, when Johannesburg was ruled by thugs”” (ibid.).

From the Johannesburg Bantu Men's Social Centre to the Orlando Communal Hall, Makhubo's technique for dealing with the rough element is a mix of physical and moral strength: [He] 'has a neat formula for dealing with tough guys. "These people are human, too. You have to treat them with respect but show them firmly they are in the wrong. Threats are useless for them. In fact, I would be dead by now if I depended on threats when controlling crowds"' (ibid.:110). A sentimentalist, 'He has never recovered from the shock of his mother's death' but lives with his sister Mary. "If it wasn't for her I would be married today", Peter explains. "But she always tells me I've got the wrong woman.'" 'But Peter Makhubo is almost certain to spot himself a Miss Right one day,' comments Nakasa.

He is one of the few men I know who has made a special study of love. He took 37 courses on love when he was in Egypt during the war. That was after trying his luck with a few Egyptian women and being coldly informed that his ignorance of the art of love needed urgent attention... "And of those 37 courses only one of them is about love," he says. "The other 36 courses are all about how to bluff a woman." (ibid.: 111-112)

This is a masterpiece of laconic humour, in which Nakasa touches on the personal arena without prurience or voyeurism, partly, perhaps, because this was an era when erotic detail was sanctioned in print by neither law nor common practice, when legal battle over *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was under way, when Henry Miller's two *Tropics* (Capricorn and Cancer) were banned in both Britain and America, and before the public and literary sexual experiments of the 1960s.

Another consideration here is Coullie's contention that 'In apartheid South Africa, the distinction between private and public was severely corroded by intrusive statutory discrimination and its enforcement' (2006: 52). The line Nakasa draws between public and private disclosure indicates his respect for the individual, particularly for someone like Makhubo whose belief in humanity mirrors that of Nakasa.

It is Makhubo's army experience during the Second World War that is less humorous and more socially revealing, particularly then, when the role of black soldiers was little publicised and not well known outside the ranks of serving men. Here Nakasa is telling a different truth from the official (white) war memories, and

his subject can be seen from different perspectives, as both hero and traitor. His friend Lewis Nkosi criticizes ‘our immediate elders’ (1965: 3-4):

We argued that before they left for the theatres of war in North Africa and Europe they must have realised that there was no democracy at home... the very war effort in which they were enjoined to participate was run on segregated lines. From South Africa there were white companies and coloured companies and General Smuts had seen to it that black soldiers were suitably armed with spears and kerries against the might of the German army.

Makhubo seems to have volunteered, and rapidly rose to the rank of sergeant because of his physique and ‘stubborn nature’. He did not take kindly to ‘white soldiers trying to boss us around’ and led 33 African servicemen against their white comrades, raiding and burning their tents, which led to a court martial. The cause seems trivial enough; the Regimental Sergeant-Major would not allow the black men to wear suede shoes ‘and there was no regulation against that’. This led to a fight, and they were flown back to Pretoria to be charged with mutiny, escaping the death penalty ‘only because they were all black and not recognised as soldiers’. Makhubo then tried to desert, and was caught ‘trying to flee to America as a negro soldier. “I only joined the army because I wanted to get out of South Africa”, Peter says. “I never wanted to know about all those places they took us to, like Egypt and Rome.”’ (ibid.: 113). In this telling anecdote Nakasa again offers neither comment nor explanation, allowing Makhubo’s voice to be heard; he establishes Makhubo’s integrity at the start of the feature, and this attempted mutiny illustrates the nature of a system that marginalized someone of Makhubo’s ability and stature on racial grounds. The trigger for this mini-insurrection bore no relation to the grand narrative of the super-power war being fought on moral grounds; instead, an apparently trivial incident of petty authority is evidenced in the right to wear suede shoes. These seem to have been a metaphor for white superiority, an acceptable dress code only for ranks above those of the African servicemen, who are seen to have aspirations above their station, being, as it were, too big for their boots. And though neither Makhubo nor Nakasa question the morality of the war, this minor incident illustrates a far wider, international reaction by subservient peoples against colonial powers during the Second World War. Of these, Gandhi’s Quit India movement is possibly the largest and best known, and marks the beginning of the end of British rule in India.

Nakasa must have been well aware of this turning point in colonial history; his inclusion of this incident, and his shaping of Makhubo's life story, offer some response to later accusations by Serote and Memele that Nakasa was a sell-out.

'Eye behind the bed post' is Nakasa's third study of a man involved in security, and is the least sympathetic, possibly because of the intrusive nature of this man's work. Edward Nonjolo Majola is a private detective 'and most of the things he looks into are very private affairs' (ibid.:114). Nakasa's style is racier, opening with a sentence closer to that of Casey Motsitsi or Can Themba 'He's a guy who spends half his life trying to look like a hole in the wall, or part of the woodwork'. Even in this portrait, Nakasa shies away from detail, experimenting with a Raymond Chandler style: 'The girlfriend was there. But so was the man's gun.' Describing 'an off-beat headmaster who fancied himself as a music man and had also taken a too keen interest in one of his pupils', Nakasa continues Majola's narrative and how 'he went to the house and straight to the bedroom. He got his evidence and the headmaster wasn't singing when he saw Majola.'

'The Magic Piper' is the headline for Nakasa's interview with Johannes 'Spokes' Mashiane, 'the man who can translate a knife squabble into song, a life into a symphony of lilting melodies' and whose 'pennywhistle rings in high-society parties in some of the country's big towns, and plenty of his discs are the craze in London and other overseas cities' (Nakasa 1985: 119, 117). In this brief feature-cum-arts-critique, Nakasa raises a host of issues; that of copyright for musicians, of the tug between self-taught and orthodox music studies; of the non-racial appeal of music in a city at a racial crossroads, in what was probably the late 1950s, judging by the political context (these are dated by the comments that 'He [i.e. Mashiane] flew from Jo'burg to Cape Town in July to play in concerts to raise funds for the Treason Trial Defence Fund' (ibid.: 118) – a trial which started in 1956 and ended in 1961).

In Nakasa's only other discussion of music, 'The myth of born musicians', he, as Michael Titlestad has it (2004:251), rather 'impishly' debunks the myth 'that music was born in Africa.... I don't see much evidence of a great tradition of worthwhile musical activity to support this myth' (Nakasa 1985: 95). It is not clear whether Nakasa is debunking African musicality in favour of European high art, as his

intention is to question the image of the ‘happy native’, content to whistle and dance; what emerges from both columns is Nakasa’s endorsement of a hybrid society, challenging any assumption of a nativist authenticity. Titlestad describes the *kwela*, the music most played by Mashiane, thus: ‘Through a peculiar, but not untypical logic, a hybrid piece of music, a *kwela* that owes more to the American twist than anything “African”, becomes a mark of *authenticity* in a production (i.e. King Kong) that might otherwise be considered “Europeanized”’ (Titlestad 2004: 98).

For the most part, Nakasa’s feature on Mashiane is couched in terms of a ‘local boy makes good’, without much analysis of the music itself, apart from the comment that ‘you get to know how much of a born artist Spokes is when you listen to some of his discs or see him in action. The deep-searching ramifications of his notes, sometimes dragging along, at other times piling up with wizardly speed, all bear the marks of products from an inner, sensitive creator’ (ibid.: 119). Mashiane is the undisputed master of the pennywhistle *kwela*, and Nakasa describes the partial success of this penniless musician; as a child he had left home ‘Off to Johannesburg, armed with nothing but a pennywhistle that produced cheerless, slum noises that nobody cared for’... he’s become a big name lately. But make no mistake. That doesn’t mean big money’ (ibid.: 117). Mashiane claims that “‘I’ve made over thirty records now”, he says. “But, you see, I only got small money from them.”” Much like land claims, intellectual property rights, and resultant copyright – in this case, for African musicians – was, and is, a contested site; the most famous being the claim by the heirs of Solomon Linda, who composed Madube, also known as ‘The Lion Sleeps Tonight’, which was popularised by Pete Seeger in 1952 as ‘Wimoweh’, and subsequently used in the Disney production *The Lion King*.

The appeal of the pennywhistle is multiracial, transcending legal and spatial barriers: ‘Only a few months ago there was chaos all over Jo’burg because, it was alleged, too many white girls and boys were dancing with black folk to the tunes of the flute at the Zoo Lake. Now, Mashiane is doing his damndest to avoid his flute getting involved in mixed shindigs with white kids as it might land him in a political pot ‘and that is not my line’ (ibid.: 118). Titlestad (2002) describes this appropriation of ‘acoustic space’ as a subversive challenge to authority:

This representation, of a piper invoking the wrath of the authorities because he leads the city's children astray, reiterates the carnivalesque. By taking charge of the acoustic terrain he inhabits, the penny whistler flaunts the sinister territorial longings of the apartheid state. Imprisoning the musician for playing is, then, an attempt to silence the 'other,' to prohibit contrary spaces of enunciation. Policing street performances is about more than regulating itinerant or vagrant musicians; it is about the ownership of and right to acoustic space. The penny-whistling urchin seems to embody one of the state's greatest fears: that territory can be so easily seized by so marginal a social actor.

Nakasa's wide-ranging interviews include several political personalities, but despite the fact that his focus is not essentially political, his portraits of rural areas endorse the paradoxes and anomalies of the late-colonial era. In keeping with *Drum's* broad Africanist perspective, he interviews prominent personalities from beyond South Africa's borders, from the then Basutoland, from the former South West Africa, and chiefs from what was Southern Rhodesia, and presents a droll, satiric interview with newly appointed members of the nascent Transkeian Legislative Assembly. What becomes evident in these features is that these leaders of essentially subject peoples are paraded as puppets, while real power rests with the white overlords. Some education, and the trappings of civilization are extended, in the form of clothing and buildings, but this tokenism is limited by the constraints of choice and proscribed decision making; and land rights remain contested territory.

Nakasa's brief forays into the field as a reporter include several articles not included in Patel's anthology, possibly because of censorship. 'Semi slavery: farm labour' (a continuation of Nxumalo's exposé of conditions on the potato farms at Bethal) was published in *Drum* in March 1959; 'Over the border; what's happening to the men who fled to Basutoland' in July 1960; in January 1961, 'Mokhales defiant challenge: Basutoland's leader', and in April 1961, an interview with Philip Kgosana. In his investigative reporting, such as his report on one of the so-called black spot removals and resettlements under Bantustan policy, Nakasa sometimes takes a stronger stand than in the urban cameos, which are filled with a benign humanism that has earned him both approval and approbation. At times, though, he avoids making any judgement, preferring an even-handed 'but even ... and also' approach.

This is particularly so when he interviews the former Regent of Basutoland, Emelia Ma-Ntsebo Seeiso, who had acted as Paramount Chieftainess before the accession of

her stepson, Prince Bereng. Described as ‘The Granny who ruled a Nation’, she was a controversial leader, but though Nakasa mentions that ‘she lived with grim rumours and fierce criticisms’, he fails to detail any of the accusations, remarking only that ‘Violently against her or almost as strongly in favour of her [they] can still be roused to arguments by the mention of her name’ (ibid.:137). She may have been a monster, but Nakasa gives her a human face, placing her in a domestic setting: ‘Photographer Peter Magubane and I paced round the house looking for her. Suddenly, there she was, with five little girls and boys, planting and transplanting trees in her garden... We said we wanted pictures and an interview. “No, my child”, she said to Peter. “I have no time for such things; I’ve got work to do”.... When I turned round, Peter Magubane was with her in the garden, struggling fiercely to get one of her trees out of the ground. And that did it. We were through to Ma-Ntsebo’s heart.... Under a cute Basuto hat, wearing a simple German frock...she looked like any other Basuto grandma...who was not prepared to give away any secrets..., [she] made her advisers, fat Basuto chiefs, work in her garden’ (ibid.:134), and opposed the appointment of a South African as Resident Commissioner for Basutoland. ‘She stood behind the Basuto people who felt that such a man would try to make the people accept incorporation by South Africa’ (ibid.:136). It is a sympathetic portrait in which Nakasa fails to mention any of the political manoeuvring in this land-locked country, nor that her regency was about to end with the succession of her stepson.

His portrait of Princess Masentla Mojela, fiancée of Prince Bereng of Basutoland, prior to the royal marriage, (‘The number one bachelor and his bride to be’) is quite the opposite – not that it is unsympathetic, but simply because he is unable to interview the bride or to find out much about her. ‘Adhering strictly to Basuto custom, Princess Masentla refused to discuss her wedding’ (ibid.:130). Nakasa is reduced to a journalist’s standby, interviewing bystanders. Her brother, Chief Douglas Mojela, said ‘she is just like any other moSotho girl.’ A classmate describes her as ‘pleasant, modest person. Although she was head prefect at the high school, she never put on airs... . She played in the first division of our netball team... and she featured in a play called *The Fruits of Polygamy*’. None of these questions achieves much, but he manages to establish some details of the wedding ceremony and custom, of how ‘Prince Bereng will come to his bride’s home...as is customary, he will be accompanied by a group of young men. His party of friends will be expected to

polish the shoes of the bride instead of the traditional washing of her feet.’ After the wedding ceremony in the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Maseru, ‘the next stop will be at the Resident Commissioner’s house for a sherry party’ (ibid.:131). (Nakasa adds no additional comment to this deliciously genteel indication of colonial proprieties.) In listing some of the dignitaries on the wedding list, he notes the absence of Ma-Ntsebo Seeiso ‘who ruled Basutoland for 19 years until Bereng returned from England’, and who had opposed his attempts to assume his position as Paramount Chief.

His interview with Winnie Mandela, the wife of ‘Black Pimpernel’ Nelson Mandela, is a fairly bland picture of a beautiful, dutiful young wife, opening with the comment that ‘nothing can kill her smile’, and ending with the remark that ‘one of the first things she took to [her husband, Nelson, on her twice weekly visits to him in Pretoria prison] was a roast chicken.’ He mentions her qualifications as a social worker, her marriage to Nelson ‘by then a successful attorney in partnership with Oliver Tambo’; their two daughters, and her own growing political stature, though ‘Winnie herself will tell you that she had little or nothing to do with politics before she met Nelson’. (ibid.:145), and there is no indication of the powerful and controversial figure that she was to become. The 1975 Ravan edition carries a postscript to this feature stating that ‘Winnie Mandela is banned under the Internal Security Act and, therefore, cannot be quoted. Thus her actual words to Nat Nakasa were extracted from this piece – Ed.’ (presumably Essop Patel, editor of the Ravan publication, rather than a *Drum* editor at the time of publication of the original article in September 1962.)

Banning may also be the reason for the exclusion from Patel’s anthology of Nakasa’s interview in April 1961 with Philip Kgosana, the young Pan African Congress (PAC) member who led the non-violent march along Cape Town’s De Waal Drive following the March 1961 shootings in Langa township. Nakasa’s contribution as Kgosana’s interviewer is limited, and this feature appears to consist of a verbatim account by this young leader who was shortly to vanish. The article in *Drum* is headed thus:

Philip Kgosana tells Nathaniel Nakasa the story of his escape. They said he was in Brazzaville. They said he was in Ghana. They said he was in Dar es Salaam. They said he was in Addis Ababa. At last they guessed he was in Basutoland. “But the only newspaper man I talked to” says Kgosana, “was a

Drum reporter, Nat Nakasa. I have told him my whole story... ‘Prince’ Philip spoke openly and told how he got away.” (1961: 19 ff.)

There is no indication, however, of how this was achieved, of what process of communication was used. Photographs of Nakasa and Kgosana in the feature give no insight as to whether Nakasa used a tape-recorder, or took dictated notes of Kgosana’s narrative, and the absence of any obvious input raises questions about the authenticity of voice, of who indeed was speaking, and to what extent Kgosana’s narrative was edited or shaped either by Nakasa, or by an anonymous sub-editor on *Drum*.

Nakasa’s obituary of Dr Alfred Bitini Xuma, former president of the then banned African National Congress, is a praise song for someone who has faded into relative obscurity in 21st century South African politics. Nakasa describes him as ‘the living symbol of what Africans can do, given the chance’, even though he ‘was almost unknown to the masses as a person’, and unfortunately Nakasa’s retrospective does little to humanise an icon, except for indicating the contradictions in belief and behaviour on Xuma’s part. Xuma’s modern house in Sophiatown was one of the few not to be demolished after the residents were removed in terms of the Group Areas Act; the white family who moved in were ‘persecuted’ by former Sophiatown youngsters who came to the house at the oddest hours, pretending to see their ‘uncle’, or asking to see the doctor. Nakasa lists Xuma’s achievements, his training as a teacher, his medical degrees abroad, his friendship with prominent African leaders of the time – Hastings Banda of Nyasaland, and Julius Nyerere of Tanganyika – and his fight against discriminatory laws. Described by a Paul Mosaka (a Johannesburg businessman) as ‘an individualist. He was the embodiment of all the confusion in Congress of those days’, he endorsed the Congress resolution that people should boycott celebrations for the visit of the British Royal family, ‘Yet he took his wife and drove to the big tribal dances in Zululand in honour of the Royal family’ (ibid.:143). J.B. Marks, a member of Xuma’s executive committee in Congress, described him as ‘a suitable moderate leader for his time whose weakness was that he was against mass action’; he was forced out of office by militant members of the Youth League, and subsequently sympathised with the PanAfricanist Congress. Yet this was the man ‘who signed a pact with Dr Dadoo of the SA Indian Congress for a united front between Indians and Africans.’ When this tactic was criticised, Xuma’s response was “‘If you cannot meet the next man on an equal footing without fearing him, there is

something wrong with you. You are accepting a position of inferiority to him” (ibid.: 144); a sentiment close to Nakasa’s own values.

Not all the people in Nakasa’s profiles are famous; some are, in the collective sense, representative rather than individual. In the introduction to *Selves in Question: Interviews on Southern African Auto/biography*, editor Stephan Meyer identifies different forms and thematic issues in this genre, including the differences between the Western concept of the individual ego, and collectivist cultures. ‘This is reflected in the responses of authors who experience their identity in relational terms, those who have been persecuted as members of a collective, those who draw on collective identity as a source of support, and those who see their auto/biographical accounts as an extension of their engagement in collective struggle’ (2006: 39-40).

‘Reporting at large’ is the collective title Patel gives to ten features by Nakasa that move away from individuals in the city, to reportage of rural conditions. These capture both this sense of collective identity and social conditions that differed vastly from his own sophisticated urban experience. Where the cities, particularly Johannesburg, offered the possibility of a hybrid identity, the more conservative rural areas, locked into an essentialist position by apartheid legislation, were experiencing poverty and deprivation of a different order, as they were being herded into tribally exclusive regions. These columns by Nakasa reveal the farce of independence in Transkei, South West Africa and Southern Rhodesia, the tragedy of removals and resettlements; what Elleke Boehmer (1995:82) describes as the lip-service paid to the ‘upliftment of the natives’, and the hypocrisy and sense of superiority that underpin notions of empire and the colonial appropriation of land.

In ‘The move out to nowhere’, Nakasa encapsulates the complexity and human sorrow involved in the competing land claims occasioned by the Bantustan policy of the National Party. He interviews both government officials and some of the villagers on the day when over 250 African families were to be moved from Klein Doornkop near Middleburg, in one of the first of these official relocation programmes. “My grandfathers bought this land on behalf of our people”, said Chief Godfrey Ramaube. “We were born here and we want to live and die on this land.”... “This place is a black spot surrounded by white homes”, said Mr Dauw Schoeman. “And

that is against the Government's policy."... A spokesman for the Bantu Affairs department in Pretoria told *Drum*: "The people in Klein Doornkop were removed in their own interests so as to link with other Bantu areas.... Theirs was an isolated little place bounded on all sides by European farms. They were fully compensated as far as the land was concerned." The Pedi villagers tell a different story as they watch the demolition: the local chief's wife says that "They want to force the people out of their homes, yet they say we are being moved voluntarily", and Chief Godfrey Ramaube's explanation is that "They [the Government] want us to fall under the Bantu Development Trust. Under the Trust, they tell you how many cattle you can keep, who can or cannot come to your house.... The truth is that they want our land because it is the richest land in this area" (Nakasa 1985:63-64).

Nakasa's account of Transkei and his satirising of Matanzima have been suggested as a possible reason why he was refused a passport to visit the United States. Yet the features on Transkei contained in Patel's anthology cannot be construed as incisive investigative reporting. Feigning innocence, he uses sarcasm and bathos to describe the visit to Johannesburg of these politicians: 'The Transkei Cabinet Ministers have been with us since the beginning of the week. Chief Matanzima's name has soared to new heights of fame, especially among the lower primary school children...[who] were instructed to line the streets and cheer the Chief Minister and his party' (ibid.: 39) he writes, in a feature entitled 'The isolated visitors'. This is hardly spontaneous public support, and Nakasa continues in this dryly humorous vein, indicating the low esteem in which the Transkeians are held both in Soweto and by the South African authorities. 'Some of us...had hoped that there would be a state banquet for the visiting Cabinet.... Instead the visitors went to have tea at the Vocational Training Centre on Monday. Now I have come to associate tea with YWCA occasions, certainly not parliamentary events...even at the tea party some of us were let down. Only invited people were allowed in.'

The Transkeians also have a police escort: 'This was...the first time African leaders had been seen enjoying so much police protection in Johannesburg. When not in jail, Soweto leaders are often on the run from the police' (ibid.). Matanzima rejects Nakasa's request for an interview: 'It would have been fun, for instance, to ask the Chief Minister about his views on Transkeians who might wish to sign up as

mercenaries for Tshombe's struggle against the Congolese rebels. I could have asked him whether he had any plans to tour the African states and meet other African leaders' (ibid.). This is one of the rare instances when Nakasa allows his own views and voice to be heard, in this case repeating a lingering ambition to become a foreign correspondent (see his correspondence with Dennis Kiley). And though he has high praise for George Matanzima, the Transkeian Minister of Justice whom he labels easy-going, approachable, intelligent, and worthwhile, Nakasa concludes, in a rare judgement, that the Minister is living in a world of make-believe. 'This was especially true when he referred to the Transkei as a separate state, a neighbour to South Africa, although we all know that the Transkei is still really governed from Pretoria' (ibid.: 41).¹⁰

Transkei was not yet officially 'independent'; that happened only in 1976 when, as the Bantustan with the largest and most cohesive land mass, it became the showpiece of the official homelands policy. Prior to 1976 its Legislative Assembly had had limited jurisdiction, along the lines of dominion status.

Nakasa's other features on Transkei are equally unflattering, presenting a picture of political ingénues who are black stooges for the white government. In 'The Contented Transkeians', he asks two visiting Transkeian attorneys, in jest: "How does it feel to be free?" (this is against a background of emergency legislation in both the Republic and Transkei in terms of which detainees were being held in jail for 90 days without trial). 'Their response was to ask, "Have you people had rains here lately?" The Transkeians left me with the impression that they have come to accept oppressive laws as being simply part of the hazard of living' (ibid.: 42).

Identifying the fictions and discrepancies of apartheid underpins the post-colonial studies that developed after Nakasa's death; a deconstruction that Boehmer describes as giving 'lie to justifications of empire which appealed to native development, civilization, Europeanization, Christian conversion. For though the native's lands were occupied in the name of civilization, they themselves, judged from the

¹⁰ Over a decade later, a 'senior Afrikaans journalist' was quoted as saying that "Those two brothers are the Papa Docs of Southern Africa", in Barry Streek and Richard Wicksteed's study of Transkei, *Render unto Kaiser* (1981:1), a damning picture of this bizarre experiment in separate development.

perspective of Europe, could not become completely civilized... the divide between Europeans and colonized peoples had to stay in place' (Boehmer 1995: 82).

Nakasa is invited to the opening of the Transkei Legislative Assembly, presumably in Umtata (described in 'Meeting the new MPs'), which 'looked like an odd wedding instead of an event of great historical moment'. His understated irony punctures the bubble of bureaucratic self-importance attached to this event by describing its incongruities, the slippage between intention and effect, between the ideology inherent in the official picture and his perspective of events. He comments that:

Some of the Ministers and Opposition members turned up in long American cars, while some seemed to have been off-loaded from the back of a lorry. I spotted one of the Government 'MP's' sitting on the pavement just outside the House chewing on half a loaf of bread and downing it with cold drink. Another one was reported by a local newspaper to be facing maintenance charges in the magistrate's court.' (Nakasa 1985: 53)

Press facilities are as segregated in Umtata as in Republican South Africa; 'the House has white and non-white press galleries. But there is only one press room, and that is reserved for whites only...on the second day...I began to sense some of the political reality which lies behind the immaculate and expensively furnished façade' (ibid.: 53-54). Modelled on the Westminster parliamentary style, the House accommodates benches for government and opposition, 'though many of the chiefs are illiterate or semi-literate.' He meets a chief 'who confessed to me that he had not read a newspaper for three months. Another member of the House on the Government side, asked what the policy of his party was, confessed that he did not know' (ibid.:). Nakasa visits some of the members of the assembly in a boarding house, where they discuss their dislike of the rigid enforcement of Xhosa hegemony in Transkei in accordance with the official policy of tribal exclusivity. Those from Matatiele, near the border with Basutoland, complain that the government had 'turned our Southern Sotho into fanagalo. The children are made to write what they don't speak.' Another comment was that: "We used to send our children to Basutoland for a better education before. Now even this is not allowed." But this conversation is cut short by an aide: "You must remember we were told not to talk to strangers" (ibid.: 54-55).

Nakasa is equally unflattering about the visit of 29 chiefs ‘from various parts of Southern Rhodesia’. (ibid.: 44). “‘If I had my way”, one of them is reported to have said, “things would work out as in the Bantustans. It is no good to mix the tribes. It causes trouble.”” Nakasa is unsurprised by their attitude, noting that they are all wearing identical nylon summer shirts; “‘the master bought them for us””, is their explanation. This ‘master’ turns out to be a Mr Morris, Secretary for Interior Affairs in the Rhodesian Government. When they were in London, he had also issued the chiefs with a letter saying “I am lost, please take me to such and such an address”. And though they are keen to establish contact with their own family members who are working in South Africa, many in modest positions, these chiefs are reluctant to speak out and to say anything ‘that would be out of step with the official policies of the Rhodesian Government not in the habit of denouncing apartheid.... “We don’t want to lose our jobs when we get back”” (ibid.:45). This is what Boehmer labels ‘civilizing the native’, a benign paternalism masking not only colonial control, but also endorsing the sense of othering that underlies segregationist practice. Nakasa’s own urban, sophisticated attitude towards these chiefs is ambivalent; he too verges on the patronising, though not to the same extent as the white governments of both South Africa and Rhodesia, which retained control while parading these token politicians in public.

Nakasa, however, was not a political reporter, and his brief encounters with politicians are the exception to his other interviews. Structuring his articles with a mixture of anecdote and analysis, his oeuvre includes interviews with people on the margins: factory workers on strike in Benoni, the mystery of three missing (black) children and one supposed (white) witchdoctor in Bronkhorstspuit, and the plight of children starving because of drought, disease, and neglect. In ‘The kids learn to live’, he visits a boarding school cum home called Kutlwanong in Roodepoort, where 123 girls and boys, some deaf, dumb and blind, have been taken in; some, like Simon, ‘picked up from a railway line by a passing social worker’. Their teacher, a Mrs Mokhudi, tells him that: “‘The first thing I try to teach them is that they have names, and what they are” (a humanising action that challenges the anonymity of statistics) ...“how did they get like this?”” he asks, to which the principal, Mr Nieder-Heitmann, replies “‘Malnutrition, bad feeding, tuberculosis.”” This experience is repeated in the Northern Transvaal, where he writes, in a column entitled ‘I saw them starve’, that ‘I

feel sick to the heart ... after driving through drought-stricken villages, where goats chew newspapers'. The children's ward at Jane Furse Hospital in Sekukuniland has two rows of beds and cots 'carrying dozens of babies, victims of malnutrition' (ibid.: 76), most of them with the swollen bellies and lethargy of kwashiorkor. 'Theirs was a plight caused partly by the current drought in the Northern Transvaal...but there are plenty other reasons...like the landlessness of the people.' This rural poverty is no different in Zululand (sic); in 'Give them their daily bread', Nakasa writes: 'Everywhere (over 700 miles) were to be found kwashiorkor, pellagra, malnutrition. At the missions and hospitals I visited, doctors and nurses, working round the clock, showed me the kids – starving, twisted by the diseases, which take many lives' (ibid.: 79). He interviews Archdeacon Gilmore of the Anglican Mission in Zululand, who speaks out against the decision to scrap school feeding. "School feeding in African schools cost the country little in terms of money and much in terms of human lives." The statistics of death from malnutrition, and an epidemic of measles, are frightening, aggravated by the drought and, comments Dr Anthony Barker in Nqutu, "the heart of the matter is that the people just cannot live on the land they have. There are about 40 000 people in the district and the land could only carry about 12 000 of them" (ibid.: 83). These sociological studies lack the personal depth of individual interviews. Nakasa had not been schooled in the anecdotal style of American journalism that moves from the particular to the general, starting with personal anecdote in the introductory paragraph, followed by discursive analysis of issues in the body of the feature.

His features on farm labour are less analytical and more immediate; his article for *Drum* on farm labour (which does not appear in Patel's anthology) mixes reportage with the individual testimony of three youths, as well as an interview with the Chief Information Officer of the Native Affairs Department; and in 'Little boy's story of death on the farm', Nakasa approaches the murder of a farm labourer from the perspective of a human interest feature for a popular magazine, rather than as a statistical event.

The reclamation of South Africa's alternative history, of giving voice to the previously voiceless and breaking the silence of Caliban, has gathered force in the past two decades, from the early 1990s, when the ending of apartheid was apparent, to

the post-apartheid years, with feminist works such as Cecily Lockett's 1990 anthology, *Breaking the silence: a century of South African women's poetry*, and editor Anemarie van Niekerk's *Raising the blinds: a century of South African women's stories*, also published in 1990, as well as a host of individual biographies, particularly those published by Mayibuye. Looming large over this genre is the Nelson Mandela oeuvre, particularly his (ghosted) autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994). Lynda Schuster's *A burning hunger: one family's struggle against apartheid* (2004), covers the history of Tsietsi Mashinini, student leader of the 1976 revolt, and is only one of many similar biographies of previously banned personalities in what has become a publishing industry. Discussing his biographies of Es'kia Mphahlele and Gerard Sekoto, Manganyi remarks that he was 'concerned with 'making history's silences speak' by saying to my compatriots that there are many black South Africans like these two who are unknown to large segments of our society but who deserve to be heard' (Manganyi 2006:163). Nakasa's undervalued columns add to these voices; his occasionally acerbic perceptions (for example, of Transkeian politicians) leavening the charge of hagiography. There is an additional dimension to these columns; not only do they 'make history's silences speak' through the individual voices that Nakasa transcribes, but in a broader sense they also provide historical context and empirical evidence for subsequent studies, Adrienne Rich's 'place on the map (which is) also a place in history'. Rather like the haunting strains of Mashiane's (recorded) pennywhistle, Nakasa's published columns and features reach across half a century, evoking both the poignancy and the vibrancy of some southern African identities in that place, and of that time.

CHAPTER FOUR

AN ELUSIVE IDENTITY

The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life.

Georg Simmel, *The Metropolis and Mental Life*

‘It’s difficult to decide my identity’ is the title of one of the last columns Nat Nakasa wrote for the *Rand Daily Mail* before leaving Johannesburg in June 1964 for New York. Forty years on, it is equally difficult to decide his identity because, I assert, the liberal status accorded him by peers like Joe Thloloe (interviewed on the video *Native of Nowhere*) is only one aspect of his enigmatic persona, much of which is defined by absence. Both product and critic of his time, Nakasa is as concerned with the politics of location as he is with the politics of race – in both cases, his claims are broad, avoiding, for the most part, an essentialist position, though some of his surprising positions further add to the instability of sign. As a journalist flaneur, his peripatetic urban identity, rootless and restless, prefigures the migrant’s sense of displacement evident at the turn of the twentieth century and in the past decade, much as his racially inclusive patriotism anticipates Rainbow Nation romanticism, however devalued that might have become. Employed by the *Rand Daily Mail* as its first black columnist with the brief to present a black South African perspective, Nakasa is a cultural translator, in Stephen Gray’s term, trading information across socio-economic barriers (Gray 1989: 20-21, quoted in De Kock et al 2005:5). His preferred medium is not just English, but the rational, ironic and humorous English of an urban sophisticate, yet his attacks on white South African literature, and on the practice and effects of apartheid, make it clear that he had not been suborned into slavish support for the system, even if he did arrive in Johannesburg armed with a tennis racket.

Part of the *Drum* generation, he is often a wraith, present by his absence from what has become an institutionalised canon of mid-twentieth century black South African writers; a shadowy presence on the fringe, occupying a marginal space as journalist, columnist and editor (of the literary magazine *The Classic*), occasionally mentioned but seldom analysed in anything more than a passing reference. In as recent a publication as the debut, Autumn 2008 edition of the literary journal *Baobab*, his fellow-Natalian, friend, and literary luminary Lewis Nkosi excludes Nakasa from his (admittedly brief) roll call of black writers like ‘Alex La Guma, Wally Mongane Serote, Mandla Langa, Es’kia Mphahlele, Keorapetse Kgositsile, even Bessie Head’. These are ‘black writers who were the primary victims of the system of racial segregation and wrote just as frequently [i.e. as white writers] against it, [but] took a secondary place in the international evaluation of our literary culture’ (2008: 10). The reasons for Nakasa’s exclusion are, possibly, because he is a journalist, not a novelist, and also because his attack on apartheid is less direct, more accommodating, and less strident than that of many of his peers, his moderate position challenging and conflating apartheid’s binaries. While there is no evidence that Nakasa experimented with form in a self-conscious approach to technique, there is a thin line between his irony, humour and creative columns and the social realism of much anti-apartheid fiction. The multicultural issues that pertain to Nakasa’s ambivalent status are addressed in Leon de Kock’s discussion (in *South Africa in the Global Imaginary*) of an earlier generation of black writers, particularly Sol Plaatje, who sought an accommodation within the ruling system because, claims De Kock, ‘in seeming to foreclose the African subject’s difference in an appeal to universal Christian virtue, Plaatje is in fact seeking an assurance that he and his brethren will not be differentiated against’ (2004a: 15). The image De Kock uses, of seam and suture, incorporates apparent differences in identity inherent also in Nakasa’s case, where ‘public enunciations of identity such as Plaatje’s, which professed allegiance to the terms of a sutured identity, nonetheless concealed a mobility of self that shuttled between the paradoxes created when sameness and difference are unevenly pressed together’ (ibid.).

In seeking an alternative to what De Kock calls a ‘foundational binary inscription’, the blatant dualisms inherent in direct opposition to apartheid, Nakasa’s ameliorative spirit is closer to this earlier generation of black elite, to writers like Plaatje, as well as

Jabavu, Dhlomo and Vilikazi, than to the struggle writers of his own and subsequent generations. These last three are among the writers at the 1936 African Authors Conference whom De Kock describes as evidencing a ‘desired identification with the colonising culture as an act of affirmation, a kind of publicity declared “struggle” that does not oppose the terms of a colonial culture’ (2004:117); Nakasa is their natural heir. During this time the centre of power moved from the imperial capital in London to Pretoria, when South Africa became an independent republic in 1961, making his accommodation not with colonial authorities but with the white South Africans who governed the country, particularly with Afrikaners as individuals. This led to accusations of complicity, crystallized in Serote’s remark that ‘Nat tommed.’ (This apparent complicity is the subject of De Kock’s ‘Sitting for the civilisation test’, in which he argues for a degree of intention on the part of earlier African writers. In the formation of the ‘native’ subject ‘what appears to be complicitous deferral to the values of the civilised white master is a combination of strategic politeness and the determination to see through the consequences of such politeness...in full awareness of the doubling of Enlightenment ideals in deferred colonial contexts’ (2004:127).)

De Kock’s arguments about the ‘cultural seam’ in which Plaatje operates, a seam through which the ‘first person singular begins to see ways of slipping across or into the seam joining with the first person plural’ are equally valid for Nakasa, who aspires to the image of an ‘elitist gentleman of bourgeois colonial persuasion’ (ibid.: 15) – the South African equivalent of the subaltern of India. This slippage in Nakasa’s case is literal as well as metaphoric, as he navigated the proscribed spaces in Johannesburg, moving between black and white zones, apparently at ease in both cultures, and in the process challenging not only apartheid’s hegemony but the nature of what De Kock defines as the ‘widespread prevalence of oppositionality as an axiomatic condition of postcoloniality’ (2004b:117). This makes of Nakasa not so much *the* authentic voice of the subaltern, as *an* authentic voice, endorsing an individualism that is evident particularly in his Johannesburg writing. The time span between Plaatje and Nakasa, between the colonial beginning of the twentieth century and the mid-twentieth century industrial, apartheid state, also measures the difference between the moral references of Plaatje’s mission-educated religious framework and the secular urban world of international opportunity that Nakasa inhabited. Where Plaatje might have been

seeking literal assurance from the colonial master, Nakasa assumed his urban identity as a right.

Nakasa, like Plaatje and his predecessors, prefers English as a medium of communication, remarking, 'I can no longer think in Zulu because that language cannot cope with the demands of our day. I could not, for instance, discuss negritude in Zulu. Even an article like this would not be possible in Zulu' (1985:159). This acceptance of English and with it access to the English-speaking world is a major aspect of Nakasa's work, and a conscious choice. De Kock convincingly argues that the use of English 'offers a shared site of memory'; an access not only to markets, but also to the values of a 'benign civitas' (2004b: 126) in which the rights of man would be accepted.

Inherent in this accommodation and incorporation of English-speaking norms is a degree of colonial mimicry that establishes Nakasa's double vision, and that starts with his arrival in Johannesburg carrying a tennis racket. Can Themba, in his tribute to Nakasa (1985:xvii), records the naïve optimism of this arrival: 'He came, I remember, in the morning with a suitcase and a tennis racket – ye gods, a tennis racket! We stared at him.... Journalism was still new to most of us and we saw it in the light of the heroics of Henry Nxumalo, decidedly not in the light of tennis, which we classed with draughts'. [This begs the question of where, whether and when Nakasa had learnt to play, and expected to play tennis.] At times mocking, and sometimes wistful, the fake voice Nakasa occasionally adopts establishes a link to a receding imperial centre whose influence had already faded. The voice of the flaneur, discussed in the first chapter, is also the voice of the subaltern, as evidenced in the following examples. In his column headed 'Johannesburg, Johannesburg', Nakasa pretends to apply for a room in a hostel for black bachelors.

I remember trying once, just for the hell of it. I picked up the telephone and spoke in a faked Oxford accent. "My name is Brokenshaw", I said, "is there a vacant bed in your hostel by any chance?" "Yes, we have some beds", the voice at the other end answered. It must have been the white superintendent. "But I must explain to you that we are only taking special boys now"... "Jolly good," I said, "my boy is actually quite special. He has to remain in town till quite late from time to time. He is a journalist." "Well, Mr Brokenshaw, I can't promise anything. You can send him along if you like." (1985: 3-4)

Had he announced himself as the black journalist in question, Nakasa is unlikely to have received the same courteous treatment; the visual anonymity of the telephone provides the cover, the mask behind which he can present a 'white' voice from a black skin. He makes a mockery of the code switching that is also a survival tactic, in 'Shopping can be a bruising business':

I never know whether to speak fanagalo or proper English when I place my order for a pencil or a pair of shoes. Some 'madams' prefer 'boys' to speak broken English, others don't. (ibid.:19)

Less attractively, Nakasa mimics the heavily accented English of a bogus Zulu priest:

I am the Arsh beeshop of the Zion African Shesh of Saud Afrika and Zoolulend,' he eventually said, switching from Zulu to English. Then, fishing out some document from his briefcase: "This is the constitution of the shesh." It soon became clear that the man knew no English apart from a few words which he had memorised parrot-fashion. (ibid.:21)

And in similar vein, he parodies the English-speaking attempts to mimic foreign (in this case, Indian) accents. Shopping in Vrededorp, he interviews an Indian shopkeeper:

"prices all sem here as town. Prices sem all ower. Of course, you find the shopkeeper that sends the prices up a little bit. Then he wait for customer to argue. Then again he bring price down a little, then look cheaper." A large Moslem man with a triple chin gave a different explanation. "You see," he said, "we not like the big boozeness man in town. We don't have lunch at Carlton for two pound." (ibid.:17)

This becomes a double mirror; the conflation of business and alcohol into boozeness offers an ironic take on the Indian's perception of white executives and their spendthrift ways. In Nakasa's unpublished letter to Dennis Kiley, enquiring about the possibility of working as a foreign correspondent in central Africa, he adopts the verbal mannerisms of the dominant Anglo-Saxon clubman of the time. His tone is both poignant, ironic and aspirational, a self-conscious adoption of the intonations of Johannesburg's affluent northern suburbs, his Wodehousian use of 'chaps', and 'jolly good' a signifier in the 'anyone for tennis' mode.

You say you spent some time in the Congo. Aren't there any chaps writing there? We have someone here who translates from French. It would be nice to get some Congolese material. If officialdom favours me with a passport I may appear in those parts driving a jeep and wearing a bushjacket as the first black tourist, neo-colonialist, imperialist journalist. (from the *Classic* files, November 5 1963)

For the most part, Nakasa's style is conservative and measured, concerned, sympathetic, wryly humorous and rational; attributes that appealed to the readers of the *Rand Daily Mail*, and that triggered Allister Sparks's interest in acquiring Nakasa as a columnist. In 'Living with my private thoughts', Nakasa writes:

Fortunately... it is possible to be scared and yet retain one's views. Because of this, people who want me to adopt their ideas simply must first earn my respect. Nothing else can get me to change my thinking. This applies to African nationalists who may threaten to do me in if I say or write that Nkrumah is now a dictator. It also applies to people who make laws, backed by force and not majority will, and then try to sell me the story that I would be better off in the Transkei instead of in Johannesburg. Nothing but proper argument, rooted firmly in commonsense, would change my mind on this subject. (ibid.: 150)

These are not the qualities that typify the racy style of his peers on *Drum*. He refers to Sophiatown, not the slang version Sof'town or Kofifi. Describing a police raid on Aunt Sally's shebeen, he writes a sober, rational and rather prim assessment of the social function of the shebeen:

that noble institution, the shebeen, threatened with destruction again...these are not just money-making concerns... they are hospitable homes, often run by solid housewives and respectable men... . It is a mistake to think all these years non-whites have been dreaming about the day they would be allowed to graduate to the status of the white drinker and be welcomed into the lounge. (ibid.: 15)

Barney Simon's anecdote about the wild Friday evening parties held by an English academic during 'the Rivonia period' also paint Nakasa as priggish and disapproving:

... these gatherings became more and more frenetic. I found them fascinating, exhilarating. Often the wives or husbands or lovers of detainees would be there, dancing the twist and the kwela, and singing. One night Nat came to a particularly noisy gathering... people were twisting wildly, singing with the record at the tops of their voices.... Suddenly he arrived.... He was watching the dancing. He had undone a few of his coat buttons [then]...began to rebutton his coat.... I demanded an explanation, and he asked if I realised that most of the blacks we were carousing with were dangerous gangsters and whores. He wouldn't go near them. He went home. (1980:76)

In similar vein, Arthur Maimane describes a shebeen scene in his novel *Hate no more*:

The wake-up young men and women of Sophiatown – the klevahs who in slang referred to the tiny location as Soph'town or Kofifi, to confuse un-wake moegoes – stood talking or laughing, sat whispering or laughing...All of them drinking, while a few had set aside their glasses to sort-of-dance to the music; alone or in couples tightly clasped to the other's bosom. The dance shuffle and sensuous movements were minimised so they hardly moved; come duze,

baby, but be cool.... Cool klevahs and their babes, but below the surface, a high-strung gaiety was palpable in the room. (Maimane 2000:41)

This tsotsi-taal was a patois signifying identity, according to Maimane:

Weetie die taal, man! No whitey understood their language, and any moegoe who tried to speak it made mistakes. It was an ever-changing mixture of Afrikaans, English, Yiddish and the vernaculars, but with certain words and phrase sacrosanct to certain strata of the wake-up. To outsiders – the laanies and moegoes – they were all tsotsis who wore tsotsi clothes and spoke this confusing tsotsi-taal. That's why these outsiders got into trouble and were looked down upon. Confusing a klevah with a tsotsi was an insult to both groups: the former despised the latter, but maintained diplomatic relations with them. It would be suicidal to show their scorn, because tsotsis were criminals who assaulted, stabbed and robbed moegoes of any colour or race. And not only in the dark of night. (ibid.: 42-3)

Nakasa seems to have flouted both these social and linguistic codes; Can Themba describes Nakasa's arrival in Johannesburg and how, as an outsider, he approached tsotsis on his first day in the golden city, asking for directions.

This was a measure of Nat's character. He was in a new situation. He knew about Jo'burg tsotsis, the country's worst. He was scared – he told me later that he was. But he went with them, chatted with them, wanted to know what type of character this, his host, was. Though he got only grunts, it was the journalist in action, not the terrified fish out of water. (Themba 1985: xviii)

Themba's term 'situation' here is significant; it was a derogatory term used, then, for social climbers. Maimane (2000:49) describes Nakasa as being a 'situation', one of those who 'speak English all the time ... "well, you see, my friend, the situation is"'. Nkosi is similarly critical of:

the ability of [Africans] to absorb alien influences and manners.... I'm thinking of words like 'situation', which is a term of abuse for members of the African middle-class trying to 'situate' themselves above the masses. And it is sitshuzimi which is an adaptation of the phrase "Excuse me", and is also used in a satirical vein to refer to pretentious half-baked Africans trying to ape the ways of white folk by a repetition of similar phrases. (Nkosi 1965: 129)

Yet Nakasa also earned the respect of his peers.

His professional distance is even more evident in Nakasa's tenure as editor of the literary magazine, *The Classic*. The name, redolent with the values of the Enlightenment, contains an unintentional parody, as the magazine was named after the shebeen at the back of a dry cleaning firm. Themba explains:

One day, we met at a dry cleaners called the Classic. Nat bought the drinks and said he had an idea. Ideas were sprouting all over the place, but any excuse for a drink was good enough. After the ninth we got around to discussing the idea. Nat proposed starting a really good, artistic magazine. He wanted all of us – I don't mean just those non-White journalists present – but all of us: black, white, coloured, Indian. For want of a superior inspiration we decided to call the damned thing *The Classic* – the place where it was conceived, born, and most of the time bred. Most of us got stinkingly drunk, but Nat captained the boat with a level head and saw to it that we met our deadlines. (ibid.: xviii-xix)

In his opening editorial in *The Classic* Nakasa undertook 'to seek African writing of merit' (Vol. 1 (1): 4), his own particular concerns being literary issues in South African writing. His statement of intent continues: '*The Classic* is as non-political as the life of a domestic servant, the life of a Dutch Reformed Church predikant or that of an opulent Johannesburg business man' (ibid.) echoing the sentiments in 'It's difficult to decide my identity'. His editorship was brief, from 1963 until 1964, when he left the country; the journal lasted until 1971. Together with co-editor Barney Simon, he created in *The Classic* a magazine that carved a new space in South African literary endeavours, a space that Michael Gardiner describes as:

a role in the cultural life of this country which was very different from that of its contemporary magazines. *The Classic* maintained a street-, township-, suburban- and political credibility that the others either lacked the capacity or the will to achieve. One key to this was a racial inclusiveness of material and a stance that addressed a black, non-racial perspective, without the assertions of principled radicalism or claims to being "alternative" or to "experimental". (Gardiner 2005. unpagged)

Nakasa left behind very little evidence of formative influence on his writing, though his literary inclinations and passion for good writing are evidenced by the fact that he left his paid employ in order to start *The Classic* magazine, with only a stipend from the Farfield Foundation. He describes an incident when he and his friend Lewis Nkosi had borrowed books from the library at the University of the Witwatersrand – presumably quite serious literary work, but there is no evidence as to which authors, and which titles they read. Foreign writers – modernists like James Joyce, African Americans such as Langston Hughes, and Africans like Alfred Hutchinson, as well as his own contemporaries (Mphahlele, Nkosi, Todd Matshikiza) are among the few he refers to (in his essay 'Writing in South Africa'). Of the few remaining friends of Nakasa still alive at the time of writing this dissertation, none can remember what Nakasa read; Nadine Gordimer guessed that 'He had read no poetry outside a school

primer and I often told him that some poems he considered publishing in the magazine were rubbish' (Gordimer 1985: xxii). Despite the gaps in his formal education, he and Gordimer would discuss poetry in detail, particularly when he was editing *The Classic* and Gordimer further reminisces about their discussions, and her comments about one poem he liked. 'I read it over: "Yes, but what it's got is not its own" and I fetched down Lorca and showed him the poem from which the other had borrowed the form and imagery that distinguished it.' The significance of this anecdote is that Gordimer herself had used the last four lines of Lorca's 'Ode to Walt Whitman' as an epigraph to her second novel, *A World of Strangers*, a novel which charts the social and political ambivalences in the late-colonial society of Johannesburg in the 1950s. Robert Green (1979:47) remarks of this novel:

Particularly fine is its evocation of the artificial barriers of life in Johannesburg, the existence there of two distinct, quite separate 'worlds', whose isolation has been legislated and is the product of human will.... Contacts are maintained only in what the novelist calls the 'no man's land', and the few houses where people of different colours can mingle.

Toby, the central character, is an outsider who 'manages to keep his balance in three worlds'; and Nakasa is in many ways his black equivalent, vulnerable to the political realities of the time, but also representing the possibility of a different life, of choice and options, much as 'the early novel is valuable for its documentation of the innocence, vulnerability and impracticality of the liberalism of the fifties' (ibid.:53). Nakasa's comment on Gordimer's novel, contained in his speech to the English Academy, 'Writing in South Africa', is that 'the African character is left alone to move about without confinement to a tight rope based on a stereotype image of the black man' (Nakasa 1985: 192). Here the freedom is not so much that of representation and of society, as of agency, and the author's intention – a different perspective; but again, a perspective to which Nakasa relates.

Nakasa's literary legacy lay in the published journal, which includes his one and only short story, 'My First Love', as well as the above-mentioned speech, 'Writing in South Africa'. The archival records of *The Classic* contain barely a trace of the man. This trace resides, literally, in the so-called flimsies containing the carbon copies of his official correspondence, with little in the way of meaningful content. What they do evidence is the professional competence of a young man who had neither matriculated nor had much in the way of office experience. His letters to authors,

printers and sponsors (particularly Thompson of the Farfield Foundation) are brisk and businesslike. It is in the replies, often handwritten, that some sense of persona emerges, with letters from Lewis Nkosi, Arthur Maimane, Ezekiel Mphahlele and Richard Rive offering a rich background to South Africa's alternative literary scene in the early 1960s.

De Kock employs the rubric 'South Africa in the global imaginary' because, he argues, 'it captures both the imposition of identity forming global discourses upon the territory ... as well as forms of self-fashioning, from within, either in the image of the greater world 'out there', or in defiance of it' (2004: 8). He also raises the question of who speaks for South Africa, of the unresolved heterogeneity in this term 'whose very nature as a signifier has been slippery and recalcitrant' (2004: 9). In this context, Nakasa's column 'It's difficult to decide my identity' constitutes an important statement of a particular form of self-fashioning South African identity, and one which would carry considerable weight in Johannesburg, the country's financial capital, appealing to the *Rand Daily Mail's* readership of literate, affluent and influential English-speaking South Africans, captains of commerce and industry, diplomats and foreign observers. Serote's perspective of these columns is that their very ambivalence offered two voices to two different audiences:

To those who had eyes to see, and ears to hear, he significantly and clearly whispered a very important message – blackman, you are being lied to. And to whites, he put a mirror before them and they saw a monkey jiving. Some whites marvelled at this black curio, and Nat went there buzzing. Other whites clenched their teeth, and waited for the right moment. How can he defy the white definition of black? (Serote 1985: xxx)

The subaltern's voice here is evident, and it is educated and urban, using mimicry both to emulate and to question the ruling classes.

Nakasa's accommodation and conflation of these binaries is a constant quality of his work and life, and defying the white (or rather, apartheid's) definition of black is exactly what he does. His approach is to incorporate a plurality of identities, subsuming them as his own in stirring phrases in this often-quoted paragraph that indirectly answers his own metaphoric questions, 'Who am I? Where do I belong in the South African scheme of things? Who are my people?' (1985:193):

‘My people’ are South Africans. Mine is the history of the Great Trek, Gandhi’s passive resistance in Johannesburg, the wars of Cetewayo and the dawn raids which gave us the treason trials in 1956. All these are South African things. They are part of me. (1985:160)

He rejects both the notion that whites are ‘Europeans’, and what he calls the silly slogan ‘Africa for the Africans’, embracing instead a non-racial view and a modernist optimism:

The Africa of today is simply not the product of assegais and rain queens. Johannesburg was built by white technical knowhow and enterprise plus the indispensable co-operation of black labour. To that extent, this city will never be black or white. (ibid.)

Nakasa’s acceptance of a complex and vibrant hybridity, of an urban culture created by divergent groups with divergent skills, anticipates postcolonial discourse on the question of constructed identity. Homi K Bhabha (1996:54), in discussing TS Eliot’s approach to the migrations of modern times and the ‘peculiar types of culture-sympathy and culture-clash’ that result, describes a ‘part culture, (a) partial culture, (as) the contaminated yet connective tissue between cultures ... and of a social subject constituted through cultural hybridisation’ that aptly fits Nakasa, particularly in his Johannesburg years, when he was navigating physical and political spaces with the apparent ease of a natural flaneur. Despite the unequal balance of power (if not of demography) at the time of his writing, Nakasa adopts a position of negotiation (of space and culture) that ‘is neither assimilation nor collaboration. It makes possible the emergence of an ‘interstitial’ agency that refuels the binary representation of social antagonism...(that) does not seek cultural supremacy or sovereignty’ (ibid.). Like Bhabha’s hybrid agencies, he deploys ‘the partial culture from which (they) emerge to construct visions of community, and versions of historic memory, that give narrative form to the minority positions (they) occupy; the outside of the inside: the part in the whole’ (ibid.: 58).

This imagined community, in Benedict Anderson’s phrase, that Nakasa describes, all these ‘South African things’, embraces black, white, and Indian history, expansionism, aggression and non-aggression. Warmly romantic though this nationalist rhetoric may be, what is less often quoted is the concomitant exclusivity of Nakasa’s position, and the rider in which he makes his national identity clear; he is a South African, for whom northern and western neighbours represent an alien other.

I'm not even sure that I could claim to be African. For if I were, then I should surely share my identity with West Africans and other Africans in Kenya or Tanganyika. Yet it happens to be true that I am more at home with an Afrikaner than with a West African. Some of my friends who have been abroad say that they got on best with Afrikaners they met in Europe instead of Englishmen or West Africans. (Nakasa 1985: 159)¹¹

He continues in this vein, commenting on the fact that Nigerian Moslems:

did not drink. We could not offer them meat because that would have gone against their faith. They raised a laugh when they told us that some of their friends at home were polygamists. "We must explain", someone quipped, "that you chaps will have to make do with one girl each in this country. We can't fix you up with a lot in one shot."

In one fell swoop Nakasa distances himself from Nigerians, Moslems and polygamists, regardless of the fact that South Africa is home to both Moslems and polygamists. His concerns fail also to include any reference to women, other than in this derogatory sense in which the chaps (good old boys) are 'fixed up'. That this religious bigotry and male chauvinism was probably unintended simply endorses Nakasa's real or imagined identification is with the dominant male *zeitgeist* at that time; while it reflects poorly on his judgement, it also illuminates the complexity of his identity, the shifting sands of differentiation. In this column he was addressing the pressing issue of his time, the white/black South African binary as a distinction that he did not endorse, and he continues:

Once we were through with this kind of talk our visitors were abandoned in one corner of the room and nobody had much to say to them. They were perfect strangers, more so than the many South African whites who spend some of their time in the townships. To speak of those Nigerians as "My people" would not make much sense, even though we all had flat noses. (ibid.)

Much as Adrienne Rich (1986:211) rejects the universality of Virginia Woolf's statement in *Three Guineas* that 'as a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world', so Nakasa rejects a common African identity. To embrace the place without embracing a concomitant patriotism may have been her ideal, but this may be the Achilles heel of Nakasa; in

¹¹ This embrace of Afrikaners is a recurrent theme through his writing, and the cause of some disbelief among his South African friends and in America, where 'they cannot understand the circumstances under which I could remain on speaking terms with Afrikaners in view of their attitudes to black men' (Nakasa 1985:173)

the discontented winter of 2008 in contemporary South Africa, his words also have an ominous ring, an alienation of foreign Africans that weakens the very humanism on which much of Nakasa's writing rests.

His humanist stance is evident in the fact that he exhibits none of the religious conviction or motivation inherent in the statements of delegates to the All Africa Convention of 1936; and unlike the appeals to God and land in the national anthem, his frame of reference is personal. He uses neither the religious reference to a higher being inherent in the African hymn *Nkosi sikele i' Afrika*; nor the Germanic appeal to blood and soil in the earlier, and now concurrent anthem, *Die Stem*, with its emotionally charged injunction to live and die for the territory of the nation state, its sky, sea and land.

The vexed issue of cultural identity is contained in one of Nakasa's last quoted comments. Kathy Conwell, in an open 'Letter to Nat Nakasa' (1985:xxxiv, first published as a posthumous tribute in the *Harvard Crimson* on 11 October 1965) describes a late-night conversation she had had with Nakasa after his return from the deep South, where he had gone to write a feature on 'the real tragedy of the American Negro. "Kathy, when I was there there were moments when I wanted to bow to a tenant farmer in Alabama, because I understood the miracle of his survival. They took away his identity and yet he has survived. In South Africa we have a language; we are a people, we are grounded in something solid."'" This comment, disturbing in both its representation and agency, begs the question of who are the "we" he refers to, who are his people? It is not clear whether this comment is as inclusive as his famous 'My people are South Africans' rhetoric referred to above, or whether he is referring back to a black position, an invocation of racial purity and tribal authenticity; and if so, whether Nakasa's American experience had triggered some kind of re-racialisation, as Obed Kunene claims in a column written for the *Sunday Tribune* in 1976, referring to a letter Nakasa had written him shortly before his death.

At a time when a 'miserable 13 percent of the land' was allocated to black people, a sense of place, and an identification with the land, was as integral to the identity of the South African nation and its individuals as was a racial profile, and most literature of the mid-twentieth century is concerned with both issues. Mphahlele's *Down Second*

Avenue, for example, uses the street of his childhood for its title; Richard Rive's '*Buckingham Palace*', *District Six* does the same for his memories of Cape Town. This appropriation of space is a naming of places that carries an archival trace, a history that 'we were there' which acts as a record for subsequent generations. The District Six Museum, for example, has inscribed on its floor rubrics from writings of the time before the Group Areas removals destroyed the community, and before the buildings were razed. These inscriptions act as a communal memory of the way District Six was, a reminder of a different time and a record, which becomes also an ideal for the future, for retribution, redistribution, and retrieval. This engagement with the specific is what American feminist Adrienne Rich defines as the 'politics of location', adding, famously, that 'even if nation-states are now just pretexts used by multinational conglomerates to serve their interests, I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history within which as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist I am created and trying to create' (1986:212). She warns against 'a false transcendence, and irresponsibility toward the cultures and geopolitical regions in which we are rooted...[but] as women, I think it essential that we admit and explore our cultural identities, our national identities, even as we reject the patriotism, jingoism, nationalism' (1986: 182). Nakasa seems to have been struggling towards this ideal, without fully achieving a separation of national identity from a degree of jingoism.

He navigates the two contested terrains of place and of body with a deftly elusive skill that engages principle while avoiding detail; generally, he eschews personal descriptions, preferring the anonymity of the observer, and his writing contains little geography of his own body, nor of his intimate relations. His occasional remarks about both are the exceptions, such as when he was snubbed in shops: 'I always used to think that perhaps I received this sort of treatment because I am small and look undistinguished' (Nakasa 1985: 9). When he consults a witchdoctor as to why he was refused a passport, she remarks: "Your trouble is that there are too many girls fighting over you." (I discarded this as rubbish, because I am always short of girls to take out)' (ibid.:166). What he does share is 'the long struggle against lofty and privileged abstraction...abstractions severed from the doings of living people, fed back to people as slogans' (Rich 1986: 213) – evident when he is reporting at large,

and particularly in his vignettes on forced removals and the satrap position of the Bantustans.

After he had been awarded a scholarship to study in America, his reaction is a deep concern that he might not get a passport: 'This is the unholy possibility which will be driving me slowly round the bend from now on' (Nakasa 1985:168). Prophetically, he anticipates his future:

Heaven knows, the last thing I want is an exit permit. I have seen enough of my friends leave the country on those. Some of them are now living as exiles in Europe, England and America. Nearly all of them write miserable letters reminiscing about the good old days in South Africa. They plead for letters and newspapers from here. They would do anything to be at our 'stockfares', those mammoth, dance-booze parties which last anything from two days to a week in the townships. Life abroad lacks the challenge that faces us in South Africa... This is the life I know, the life I would miss as an exile.' (ibid.)

This dislocation translates into what Mphahlele describes as the 'tyranny of place', his need, and that of many South African artists, to be in their own terrain, in the amniotic fluid of the familiar and the nurturing. Writing of his own reluctance 'to be sucked into the American thing', Mphahlele remarks that:

I could identify intellectually and emotionally with the black American's condition, but I could not in any tangible particular feel his history.... I had to return home if I wanted to teach in a situation whose cultural goals I understood.... As long as I was in this frame of mind, I was not going to create fiction out of the American experience. I have abandoned myself to the tyranny of place, and as long as I do not have that sense of place, as long as I cannot remember a place by its smells and the texture of its life, I cannot create a sustained literary work out of it. South Africa, and Africa generally, still claimed me... Indeed, exile had become for me a ghetto of the mind. My return to Africa was a way of dealing with the concrete reality of blackness in South Africa rather than with the phantoms and echoes that attend exile (ibid.: 71-74).

Ntongela Masilela speculates, in his essay entitled *The Political forms and cultural processes of a particular South exile*, that the reason behind Mphahlele's return from exile was in fact Nakasa's suicide, and the phantoms and echoes that attended Nakasa:

It may be that Ezekiel Mphahlele never fully recovered from the shock of Nat Nakasa's suicide, perhaps indicating to him the futility of the exile experience, and thus compelling him to return to South Africa a decade later. Mphahlele has had some bitter experiences in Africa, which have led him to turn his back on Africa. This is one of the colossal failures of Mphahlele. Being profoundly romantic in his cultural alignments, he has no understanding of political realism.

Aggrey Klaaste's comments on exile are that:

Life for most people, writers, black or white, in the South Africa of the sixties, was insular. There was no contact with outside literature, history or other creative impulses. South Africans have and are still given a very limited view of the world, so when they get outside and find a universality in agony and ecstasy, that throws them. They are looking for the land of Eldorado when they leave. They usually find only a repetition of the Wastelands. (Klaaste 1988:10)

This disillusionment has many tributaries, and Obed Kunene, who had been his 'close friend from school days through [our] entry into journalism' (1976) sees Nakasa's exilic crisis in a different light, as a dislocation of racial identity rather than this tyranny of place, and attendant need to return home. Writing eleven years after Nakasa's suicide, and on his own return from a state-sponsored visit to the United States, Kunene debates at length the 'big question mark that remains a puzzle to this day. Why did he do it, if indeed it was suicide?' His speculation continues: 'I believe frustration and disillusionment killed my good friend. I believe Nat got to the US at the wrong time. I believe that during his short sojourn there, Nat came face to face with himself...and found he did not really know or understand who or what he was. It was a question of identity, or lack of it.' The trigger seems to have been the 'tough time he was having at the hands of inquisitive 'Negroes'' who questioned him about Shaka in particular, Zulu kings in general, and his own tribal origins. Black consciousness, which he had not encountered in South Africa, had changed his perception of non-racial possibilities. Kunene concludes: 'Had my friend Nat come up against an identity crisis, I wondered. The story goes – and I have it on the authority of many close friends – that in Johannesburg, where he made his name as a magazine and newspaper columnist, Nat hobnobbed more with the Whites of Lower Houghton than with the Blacks of Soweto' (ibid.). Singh (1990:7) asserts that:

Nakasa's crisis of identity can be seen to be the product of a combination of several factors: the expectations of his mission-school education; the failed hope of the fifties that defiance of the colour bar would be effective; and the lack of opportunity for the creative realisation of Nakasa's own literary sensibility, which was typical of the liberal conception of art prevalent in English-speaking circles of the day, according to which humanity was seen in literature ideally to transcend sectional political interests.

Nakasa's conflation of binaries goes beyond the divisions of apartheid-era South Africa; as both an exile, and an intellectual immigrant in the United States, he exercised a degree of choice in accepting the Nieman Fellowship to Harvard, a voluntary displacement that resulted in state-sponsored banishment. In her critique of the rigid definition of both exile and diaspora in Aijaz Ahmed's 'In Theory', Kaplan (1996: 103-109) discusses the blurring of borders between 'exile [as] the almost exalted form of travel, forged in pain, cleansed by a singular glory...[that] may never be confused with the contaminated indulgence that characterizes the cosmopolitan.' Nakasa's exile contains both qualities, being both a voluntary expatriate and an involuntary political refugee, suffering, in the process, what Kaplan (ibid.) describes as 'the alienation of writers or intellectuals from the abuses and injustices of their 'home' locations [that] can generate an 'unhousedness' or displacement that brings them in solidarity...[with] the involuntary exile on the terrain of textual and political affiliation'.

Part of the paradox of Nakasa is that while he defines himself as being of South Africa he makes no land claims in it nor for it. Durban-born, and therefore an immigrant of sorts, he is, if anything, a Johannesburg man, most at home when walking the city – a metaphoric giant striding, like the Jo'burg man photo montage by artist Arlene Amaler-Raviv and photographer Dale Yudelman, across a cityscape of street and building. Much like Baudelaire's Parisian Prowler, he retains a role as semi-detached spectator, but without the negative connotations of the superfluous idler. For Nakasa, his adopted city, a cosmopolitan Johannesburg (or at any rate his construct of a cosmopolitan Johannesburg) was his touchstone and the source of his inspiration.

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