

The Militant Listener: Reading Mongane Wally Serote's *Sikhahlel' u-OR* alongside Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*

In *Sikhahlel' u-OR: A Praise Poem for Oliver Tambo*, Mongane Wally Serote presents an unflinching yet delicate meandering through the questions, reflections and provocations resistance history offers up through O. R. Tambo's life. As Ciraj Rassool points out, in this work Tambo appears not as an individual, but as an integral node in a web connecting various lives.¹ This counter-neoliberal interpretation of Tambo's life offers what Michael Löwy calls 'a heterodox form of the narrative of emancipation' rebuilding the struggle hero narrative along a decentred framework.² By radically dislodging this narrative, Tambo is portrayed as the 'non-iconic icon' he was esteemed to embody, and in this move, the poem, notably, points to the dearth of dialectic politics, both in our quotidian praxis, and the commemoration of others.³ Aptly, Serote's work contributes to what Souleymane Bachir Diagne and Jean-Loup Amselle describe as a 'total decentring of all thought, one that rejects all "centrism" and highlights instead branchings and connections, transfers, analogies and reciprocal influences between cultural places and intellectual fields that may be distant but are not distinct in space and time'.⁴ To this end, the poem presents us with a constellation of historical actors who flicker on the horizon, beckoning us to engage in the labour of freedom ('here we go again / the hour demands us to be daring once more / to emerge from a possible storm').

The meditative ruminations the poem offers us are strikingly suggestive of Walter Benjamin's angel of history, who invokes us 'to still the storm, to bandage the wounded, reawaken the dead and mend what has been put asunder'.⁵ The function of Benjamin's practice, rather than a traditional historical account, is to draw out expressive moments, and by borrowing the style of the montage, with its startling juxtapositions, create an eruption of possibilities for the future.⁶ It asks of us to resist the powerful wind of determinism, which denies pause and contemplation, and thoughtlessly drives humanity into the future⁷ ('who ever said there are no choices / hard as they may be').⁸

A crucial catalyst in this process of pathfinding is the mode of dialectical enquiry Benjamin points us to. Although the word 'phalanx' only appears twice in the poem, I would argue it serves as a central motif for the ideas carried throughout.

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- 1 Flagship on Critical Thought in African Humanities, 'A Conversation with Dr Mongane Wally Serote on the launch of his epic poem *Sikhahlel' u-OR*; YouTube Video, 1:20:36, 11 March 2021, <https://youtu.be/B4CkxYiTVsc>.
 - 2 M. Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'* (London: Verso, 2006), 2.
 - 3 L. Callinicos, *Oliver Tambo: Beyond the Engeli Mountains* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2004), 416.
 - 4 S. B. Diagne, J. Amselle and A. Brown, *In Search of Africa(s): Universalism and Decolonial Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Books, 2020).
 - 5 Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 67.
 - 6 M. B. Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 89.
 - 7 W. Benjamin, 'Theses on the philosophy of history' in H. Arendt (ed.) and H. Zohn (trans.), *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 253-264.
 - 8 M. W. Serote, *Sikhahlel' u-OR: A praise poem for Oliver Tambo* (Cape Town: Kwela, 2019), 38.

Combining the idea of coordinated and forceful movement with the tender touch of fingertips, this dialectical image envelops the reader in a close conversation between intrepid grit and tender thoughtfulness that serves as a footnote to every pathway of O. R. Tambo's life. Social change is presented as a balancing act between conviviality and resolute, uncompromising action, patience and vigilance, forgiveness and unflinching dedication to honesty ('such granite-hard love').⁹ Like Tambo's youthful aspiration to heal by marrying traditional medicine and medicine as hard science, his political praxis consisted of psychosomatic sensitivity combined with scalpel-like decisiveness in his strategy.¹⁰

were you teaching us mathematics like a poem
or a poem which like mathematics
says
there is a straight line in a zigzag¹¹

In this dialectic '*Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu*' becomes a battle cry that builds strategic coalitions with steadfast precision and patient, careful listening. Unlike '*ubuntu*', the unabridged '*Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu*' fends off assimilation, refusing to be adopted by capital as a misappropriated pacifier. Tambo, as the militant listener, explodes all our contemporaneous preconceptions about what effective resistance looks and feels like, reminding us of the usefulness of measured negotiation in an age of sharp divides and moral purism.

Perhaps the most arresting aspect of Serote's poem, however, is the way the name OR is repeated until it becomes a studious incantation. Tambo's name becomes a sonorous rhythm which opens up an itinerary of self reflection and radical possibilities for our present moment (the present has been lived and the future waits in starry eyes / it defines us and asks / who are you / and we must answer).¹² This anticipation of creative reimagining hints to Benjamin's emphasis on opening up potentialities and drawing our attention to the constellation of possibilities every juncture implies. Furthermore, Tambo's mottled imbrication with layers of histories and people, expands the horizon of inspiration to draw from in this contemporary moment (*lutuli sisulu kotane j b nokwe dadoo fischer / ma sisulu ma seperepere*).¹³ The lines of names become like a new vocabulary, a garden of sounds which opens up forgotten histories and blasts them to the tip of the reader's tongue. Serote arms us with the vocabulary to reconstruct the present along Benjaminian lines. Fragments from the past are grasped and reconstructed in a constellation, linking forgotten histories – left behind by progressivist time – to the present moment. In this moment time stops and the ceaseless continuum of progressivist time is blasted open.¹⁴

9 Ibid., 77.

10 Flagship on Critical Thought in African Humanities, 'A Conversation with Dr Mongane Wally Serote.'

11 Serote, *Sikhahlel' u-OR*, 52.

12 Ibid., 106.

13 Ibid., 96.

14 Benjamin, 'Theses on the philosophy of history', 253-264.

OR

these women young with backbones hard as steel but pliable as
worms
all of you will agree
one by one by one the years piled up
past a time that is as still as these mountains of mbizana
where the breeze embraces the stoic hills
under the white clouds and the overbearing blue skies
where the rolling landscapes forever tempt the eye to walk them
here where
songs of peasants were sung
have been sung and are being sung
here and now¹⁵

The Eastern Cape landscape of Tambo's birthplace, that Serote evokes, is not a surveyed and calculated territory, measured up and appraised into calibrated units, but a land gathering memories and testimonies of physiography, fauna and flora, man-made structures, people and their experiences, civil and communal relations, hopes and disappointments.¹⁶ This embracive reading of land against the logic of dominion, opens up new avenues for dissent. Serote offers up the very highways and railways that act as buffer zones for spatial segregation, as the itinerary 'to claim freedom from treachery'.¹⁷ Time and again, Serote aids us in the dialectical historical process in order to open up our senses to new possibilities.

Both Tambo and Benjamin were working to untangle the momentum of fascism during their time with a dialectic approach to liberation. The fluid and elusive adversary we currently face, in the form of the global capitalist system, represents an even more formidable challenge than its predecessor. Wendy Brown notes how 'one crucial effect of neoliberal rationality is to reduce the desire for democracy, along with its discursive intelligibility when it does appear'.¹⁸ At the rise of the National Party in 1948, Tambo responded to the news by confessing: 'Now we will know exactly who our enemies are and where we stand'.¹⁹ The invisible economic empire does us no such favours. Serote's poem asks us to grab on to a web of human relations and blast open the determinism of our current market temporality.

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15 Serote, *Sikhahlel' u-OR*, 21.

16 C. Tilley and K. Cameron-Daum, *Anthropology of Landscape: The Extraordinary in the Ordinary* (London: UCL Press, 2017), 1-22.

17 Serote, *Sikhahlel' u-OR*, 108.

18 W. Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 200.

19 Callinicos, *Oliver Tambo*, 158.