

“Shakespeare nev’r said so!”: A Reconsideration of South African Shakespeares in the Early Apartheid Period

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Abstract

This article brings together two distinct forms of engagement with Shakespeare by Black South and southern African writer-intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s. Writers associated with *Drum* magazine and Sophiatown quoted from and adapted Shakespeare in their performance of a cosmopolitan identity resisting the strictures of the early apartheid period. At the same time, there was a modest boom in translations of Shakespeare into African languages. With the exception of K.E. Masinga, who translated and adapted nine plays as serialised radio dramas, the translators of this era—who worked as teachers or in the education system—produced texts that were primarily intended for use in schools. The intersection of this phenomenon with Bantu Education policies and practices complicates the story of South African Shakespeare translations. The *Drum* writers and the translators have previously been confined to separate areas of enquiry; here, we place them alongside one another, aiming to generate new insights into their shared historical moment by studying their differences but also by identifying commonalities.

Keywords: Shakespeare; South Africa; translation; *Drum*; Sophiatown

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Introduction

The 1950s and 1960s are recognised as a period of flourishing postcolonial creative and scholarly engagement with Shakespeare across what we might now think of as the Global South. Sustained political and intellectual decolonisation initiatives across Africa were complemented by corresponding movements in the Caribbean, where plays like *The Tempest* and *Othello* were regularly performed or adapted by activist theatre makers and formed part of public discourse (see Nixon 1987), arguably culminating in Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête* (1969). George Lamming's collection of essays *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960) and his novel *Water with Berries* (1971) perhaps best represent Caribbean literary responses to or appropriations of *The Tempest*. In an African context, it is an era associated with Julius Nyerere's Kiswahili translations of *Julius Caesar* (1963) and *The Merchant of Venice* (1969)—Shakespeare recruited into an African liberationist project and, in particular, Nyerere's socio-economic philosophy of Ujamaa—or, in a very different vein, Thomas Decker's *Juliohs Siza* (1964) in Sierra Leone Krio.

These different models for engaging with Shakespeare—citation, adaptation, appropriation, parody, translation—may be discerned in the work of various contemporaneous Black South and southern African writers. There are similarities, too, in broad thematic terms; one may point to Lamming's treatment of Caliban, who becomes not just any colonial subject but specifically the colonised writer-intellectual, the marginalised person of letters frustrated by limited possibilities for political and cultural freedom (Nixon 1987, 568). Yet the South African context could not have been more different. For while the decades following the Second World War brought independence for most former colonies of Britain and France, Black South Africans saw freedom receding further as they were enfolded by the iron grip of apartheid following the 1948 election that brought the National Party to power.

As early as 1949, the Youth League of the African National Congress (ANC) forced their Programme of Action against the government into ANC policy. The first Group Areas Act of 1950 initiated an even more aggressive form of racial segregation than had been imposed in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1952, the Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign was launched. The state passed the Bantu Education Act in 1953, condemning future generations of Black South Africans to be no more than “hewers of wood and drawers of water”—labourers in service of white comfort and capital. In 1955, the Freedom Charter was signed; in the same year, the apartheid government introduced the pass book or *dompas*, further restricting Black people's movement. The landmark Women's March on the Union Buildings came in August 1956, in reaction to the provisions of that law; in December, over 150 political agitators were arrested and put on trial for treason. Forced removals of Black people from urban locations like Sophiatown began in 1955 and continued until the final destruction of District Six in 1966. The 1960 Sharpeville massacre signified the state's appetite for more violent clampdowns, and the decade that followed brought the expansive programme of grand

apartheid, including the creation of Bantustans: the so-called homelands into which Black people were to be corralled, generally in rural areas far from the major cities, based on the dubious designations of ethnicity or tribe (here the government was deliberately employing outdated and inaccurate colonial terminology).

Against this backdrop, Black South African writer-intellectuals' responses to Shakespeare took chiefly two forms. One, well-documented and more celebrated, is found in the work of the *Drum* generation, so strongly associated with *Drum* magazine and with journalistic, essayistic or fictionalised accounts of Black life in Johannesburg—especially Sophiatown—in the post-war decades. Although, as Paul Gready (1990) notes in clustering Es'kia Mphahlele, Arthur Maimane, Henry Nxumalo, Todd Matshikiza, Bloke Modisane, Can Themba, Nat Nakasa, and Lewis Nkosi together as “the Sophiatown writers of the Fifties,” their experiences and their subjects “vary considerably,” Sophiatown was “influential for all of them as people and writers” and they each lived there at one point or another (183). Another thing that many of them shared was a trajectory towards exile—an almost inevitable result, as Stefan Helgesson (2009) suggests, of the conflict between the “racial subjection” of their daily experience and the ambition of their “literary cosmopolitanism” (122). Lindy Stiebel and Liz Gunner (2006) show how, while Nkosi, Nakasa, Themba, Modisane, Mphahlele, Maimane, and other writers “took [the] desire to be part of a wider intellectual world with them into exile” (xxii), this desire was “already apparent in Can Themba’s declamations of Shakespeare on the street corners of Sophiatown, Modisane’s playing of Brahms in his room in Gerty Street and Nkosi’s love of jazz and his early interest in modernism.” Shakespeare was thus both a part of the *Drum* writers’ performance of cosmopolitanism and, in some cases, recruited into their commentary on South African society and politics, as argued by Natasha Distiller (2005, 2012) and Siphiwo Mahala (2022).

Less widely known is the work of Shakespeare translators into African languages during this period. These translators ranged from popular broadcaster K.E. Masinga, who adapted nine Shakespeare plays into isiZulu radio dramas in the 1950s, to educator-turned-politician B.B. Mdllele, who published full translations of *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, and *Twelfth Night* into isiXhosa in 1956, 1959, and 1961, respectively. Gunner’s cultural history of Black (and in particular isiZulu) radio broadcasting positions Masinga within the same Johannesburg-Sophiatown milieu as the *Drum* generation (see Gunner 2019a, 2019b), although his primary location was Durban. In our previous studies of Mdllele, we have explored the ways in which his Shakespeare translations emerged simultaneously from his vocation as a teacher, his class position as a member of the Black intellectual elite in the Eastern Cape, and his desire to promote the Xhosa language and culture—but we have also considered the extent to which his achievements as a translator may be seen as compromised by his decision to join Kaizer Matanzima’s cabinet in the government of the Transkei: arguably a form of collusion or complicity in the infrastructure of apartheid (see Mtsaka 2023, 2026; Thurman 2020, 2025). Other translators from this period include M.O.M. Seboni (*1 Henry IV* into

Setswana in 1952 and *The Merchant of Venice* in 1961), Sibusiso Shange (*Merchant* into isiZulu, 1954), Samuel Baloyi (*Julius Caesar* into Xitsonga in 1958), K.E. Ntsane (*Merchant* into Sesotho, 1961), L.D. Raditladi (*Macbeth* into Setswana, 1968), and C.N.M. Phatudi (whose first Sepedi Shakespeare translation, *Julius Caesar*, appeared in 1966). Theirs was not the frenzied world of Sophiatown—but their earnest Shakespearean endeavours do share some similarities with the *Drum* writers' more cavalier approach of appropriation and citation.

Given that these two forms of engagement with Shakespeare by Black writer-intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s have generally been confined to separate areas of enquiry, in this article we seek to bring them together. If we place the *Drum* writers alongside the translators, we can gain new insights into their shared historical moment by studying their differences but also by identifying parallels and commonalities.

“Kofifi” Shakespeares

When writing about Shakespeare and Sophiatown—known to its denizens as Kofifi—commentators can fall into a familiar trap: what Jonathan Holmes, discussing the tendency among white British-South African theatre makers like Janet Suzman and Antony Sher to ascribe a particular relevance or urgency to Shakespeare in South Africa, identifies as “an Elizabethanism of South Africa” (2002, 278). This might equally be termed the “Elizabethanisation” of South Africa, a process through which “the country is positioned as ‘closer’ to Shakespeare than the modern or postmodern west because of its violence, its lack of regulation and its belief systems” (Thurman 2015, 88). It is an argument, or rather an assumption, that may be identified in African Shakespearean conception and reception over many decades, from the response to *uMabatha* (the “Zulu *Macbeth*”) in the United Kingdom in the 1970s all the way to the Royal Shakespeare Company’s 2012 “African” *Julius Caesar*. This essentialising of Africa may also be discerned in scholarly contributions such as Guy Butler’s 1992 essay “Notes on Seeing and Hearing Shakespeare’s Plays in South Africa,” which presents Africans as “altogether more aware of the numinous, the unearthly, the sacral,” and thus better equipped “for a more spontaneous response to certain elements in, for instance, *Macbeth* and *The Tempest* than the products of industrial secularisation” ([1992] 1994, 224).

The locus classicus of this phenomenon, when it comes to writing about Shakespeare and Sophiatown from a white perspective, is found in the recollections of Anthony Sampson, editor of *Drum* magazine from 1951–1955. The British journalist, in various iterations over the years, brought the Shakespearean framework of his Oxford education to analysis of his South African sojourn. As early as 1956, in *Drum: A Venture into the New Africa*, Sampson recalled an evening “in a noisy Sophiatown shebeen” (80):

It came to me suddenly that I was watching an Elizabethan play. It was as if the characters had tripped straight from the stage of the Globe, lugging their dead bodies with them. Sophiatown had all the exuberant youth of Shakespeare’s London. It was the same upstart slum, with people coming from a primitive country life to the tawdry

sophistication of the city's fringes. Death and the police state were around the corner: and there was the imminent stage direction: Exeunt with bodies.

It was in the shebeens that moral purists were broken in and socialised into the local lifestyle, and where the likes of Sampson, *Drum* publisher Jim Bailey, and other white people were entertained. Hence Sampson's vivid impression that "this wildly extrovert world seemed often enough like a Shakespeare play come to life, with all the comedy of the Eastcheap Tavern, Falstaff and Mistress Quickly, but with terror and murder in the wings" (in Heyns 1982, 16). For Sampson, this "scene from Falstaff"—the comparison is a familiar conceit in his writing—was "wildly romantic" (1956, 65). Yet the atmosphere observed by Sampson may perhaps be better understood in terms of the clampdown on Sophiatown as an environment offering pockets of freedom for Black people, and the constant looming threat of forced removals. This drew people of all social classes and political persuasions into anxious conversation and sometimes protest action, inspired by their concerns about the new locations they were going to be resettled in after they had been displaced from their beloved Kofifi. The net result was a flattening of social hierarchy within Black society. All social classes here were hit hard, since the elite stood to lose their income-generating properties, while the poor and working class faced the prospect of a higher cost of living in smaller dwellings in Soweto after enjoying the relatively affordable rentals of Sophiatown.

As Natasha Distiller points out, the *Drum* writers' lived experience was ultimately fundamentally different to that of a figure like Sampson. Consider this passage from Bloke Modisane's *Blame Me on History*:

Violence and death walk abroad in Sophiatown, striking out in revenge or for thrills or caprice; I have lived in my room, trembling with fear, wondering when it would be my turn, sweating away the minutes whilst somebody was screaming for help, shouting against the violence which was claiming for death another victim ... I would admit that no man, no relative or friend or stranger deserves the death of a beast. It was Caesar's boast that "the skies are painted with unnumber'd sparks, they are all fire and every one doth shine"; if I allowed one spark—no matter how distant and insignificant—to be extinguished, then by this, my fire too would forfeit the light to flicker. (Modisane [1963] 1986, 59–60)

Prompted by Modisane's Shakespearean quotation, and keeping Sampson's Eastcheap conceit in mind, Distiller writes:

The difference between observer and participant is inscribed in the differences in emotional response to the drama. For Sampson, the Shakespearean framework describes voyeuristic enjoyment; for Modisane Shakespeare's texts become a conduit for the expression of distress, as well as for signifying the effect of extreme and sustained violence on himself and others of his community in what, because of Shakespeare's cultural status, was a suitable register. (Distiller 2003, 92)

Nevertheless, while one may be hesitant about embracing Sampson's descriptions—as white, English observer, and as *Drum* editor—of Sophiatown as being like Shakespeare's London, the fact remains that a number of Black *Drum* writers made similar connections. In *Home and Exile* (1965), for instance, Lewis Nkosi remembers that it was not only “the cloak and dagger stories of Shakespeare” but “the cacophonous swaggering world of Elizabethan England” itself that gave his generation “the closest parallel to our own mode” (18).

This introduces us to the sense of ambivalence in the *Drum* writers' shared Shakespearean apprenticeship. Despite Nkosi and his colleagues being agitated by the colonial legacy of racial inequality, they nonetheless accepted assimilation as part of their African identity. It is clear that Shakespeare helped them to bring both the anguish and the wildness of the Sophiatown condition into writerly focus. Shebeen life acted as a palliative for the pressures that came with living in the social and emotional crucible of the township; these writer-intellectuals created for themselves a temporary utopia where they drank and revelled as a form of masking, expressing desire and ambition in an atmosphere of repression. Liberation of the spirit, as in all carnival activities, was the end to strive for. This is Bakhtin's carnivalesque writ large, breaking the rules of decorum and so subverting the order of the day, celebrating a brief suspension of “hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” and gaining “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order” ([1968] 1984, 10).

Among the *Drum* writers, while Casey Motsisi became known as “Shakespeare of the Shebeens” for his habitual declamation of speeches while standing on top of a table, it was Can Themba who was the ultimate Lord of Misrule. In his widely-cited 1963 essay for *The New African*, “Through Shakespeare's Africa,” Themba explicitly endorses Sampson's view that “the turbulence of African life was like the stage of Shakespeare's Elizabethan world—the action, the passion, the lasciviousness, the high drama. The violence and then: ‘Exeunt with corpses’” (Themba 2006, 131). He references numerous Shakespeare plays, from *Othello* to *Julius Caesar* (see Mtsaka 2026), but returns repeatedly to the Hal/Henry/Falstaff paradigm. While this extends to the Henriad more broadly—a police officer who is caught drinking in a Dube shebeen apologises by uttering Bates's words from *Henry V*: “If his cause be wrong, our obedience to the king wipes the crime of it out of us” (Themba 2006, 137)—his greatest interest is in the Eastcheap of *1 Henry IV*. First there is the “huge but electric” Dumizulu, acclaimed in Sophiatown as the King of Jive, who like Falstaff “sweats to death, And lards the lean earth as he walks along” (134). Themba projects his own Falstaffian identity onto Dumizulu, merging colonial culture with that of the townships. He then cautions the reader about the kind of company that any well-brought up youngster should avoid:

For a fact, the relationship of Prince Hal with the ragamuffins Falstaff and Co. has reproduced itself countless times in urban South Africa. The rich man's son joining the excesses of ne'er-do-wells and, when their nefarious exploits have not come off so well, he pays for their entertainment in brothel and shebeen. (134)

Here, Hal stands for the young white men dallying in Black spaces, “high-born youth from wealthy Parktown among dubious companions in Alexandra Township”: “No one has told us all that Johnny has been doing in Sophiatown, Kent in Alexandra or Mike in Orlando. These boys were accepted among tsotsis, cherries and churchgoers as readily as Father Huddleston. I wish more of the township bright boys had heard of Harry Bolingbroke” (135).

Unlike Falstaff, who enjoys the safety net of a privileged position in his society as he walks the tightrope of his reprobate lifestyle, Themba had only his wit and ingenuity to rely on. But there was another side to the performance. Nkosi’s obituary for Themba regrets that he “always disguised his own pain behind a devil-may-take-the-hindlegs kind of attitude and a prodigious reliance on alcohol as a drug. His drinking was phenomenal” (Nkosi in Themba 1972, ix). Of Themba and Nat Nakasa as a duo, Lewis writes:

[T]here was always something strangely sinister and altogether ominous in their form of detachment and the desperate wit they cultivated, in the mocking cynicism of the one and the love of irony of the other. Each in his own way tried to reduce the South African problem into some form of manageable game one plays constantly with authority without winning, but without losing either. In order to survive and in order to conceal the scars, they laughed, clowning, mocked and finally embraced their “outlaw” condition with all its surrounding cloud of romantic tragedy and supposable drama. (vii)

This brings to mind Kelwyn Sole’s observation about the *Drum* generation: “[M]any of them seem to have reacted to oppression first and foremost as it affected them personally” (1979, 158). Themba’s attitude towards the social malaise of his time, shared by many of his peers, was that since their worth was not recognised by the ruling (white) class they would have to affirm themselves. Whether the activities of the *Drum* writers were self-seeking or otherwise, it cannot be denied that their agenda was revolutionary in its carnivalesque mimicry which, contrary to Bhabha’s conceptualisation of crude imitation, serves to wreak anarchic creative energy and allows the author to avoid censorship or other forms of punishment. This may not apply directly to the Shakespearean resonances in, say, Themba’s short stories (“Mob Passion” as a version of *Romeo and Juliet*, “The Suit” as an adaptation of *Othello*), but it is revelatory as a method for reading passages in “Through Shakespeare’s Africa.” The tone of this address to young Black men via *Othello* is difficult to pin down:

Cultivate yourself into a superior being; grapple with something in their world and succeed: become a scientist, a literatus, talk as if the highbrow things come naturally to you: a theory, a poem, grand passion; and especially, despite your ebony complexion, that you have a sensitive soul and cannot abide the crudities of your own people, even. Then trembling whitedom looks round at you with that curious mixed reaction of fear, wrath and horror. Écrasez l’infâme!

It is just this that Othello went and done. Worse still, he made himself indispensable to the state. It is this, also, that the urban African is continually doing. He acquires degrees, if no more from Fort Hare, then Britain or America, and now dares to pontificate on the body politic or the cosmos. (Themba 2006, 138)

Themba recognises that he himself, an “urban African,” is as compromised as Othello is by assimilation. Yet the invocation of Othello allows him to express his anger at apartheid society more stridently than he might otherwise dare. Othello and Shakespeare alike are recruited into the sphere of the Sophiatown *manne*.

There is an echo of this in Bloke Modisane’s objection to white people’s refusal to allow Black people to attend classical music concerts because they are supposedly unable to appreciate the art form. “If I am a freak,” Modisane protests, “it should not be interpreted as a failure of their education for a Caliban” ([1963] 1986, 179). Quoting Shakespeare directly becomes another mechanism of protest when the destruction of Sophiatown begins and Modisane remonstrates with the police by shouting Laertes’s lines:

To hell, allegiance! Vows, to the blackest devil!
Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!
I dare damnation. To this point I stand,
That both the worlds I give to negligence,
Let come what comes; only I’ll be revenged
Most thoroughly for my father.
(*Hamlet* 4.5.131–136; Modisane [1963] 1986, 143)

Thus, while Nkosi remarks that the likes of Themba, Nakasa, and Modisane were resolute to “eliminate the thinnest traces of self-pity” and to ensure that “gaiety, lust and bravery” (1965, 8) defined their character, they were not quite “masterless men” in the mode of the relentlessly comical Stephano and Trinculo in *The Tempest*. Of his own behaviour during this period, Modisane writes that he was seeking “a philosophy to justify the depravity of [his] life”; having reserved for himself “a freedom from morality,” he surrendered himself to “the lower freedoms: the freedom of all vices” (in Stiebel and Gunner 2006, 299). Themba, too, sunk to lows of self-pity and despair: “As I brood over things ... I feel a sickly despair which the most potent bottle of brandy cannot wash away. What can I do?” (Themba 2006, 64).

Along with the defiance of carnival, then, there was also desperation. Hedonism was a form of rebellion but could equally signal the acceptance of defeat for the *Drum* writers. As we shall see, this was at odds with the desire for respectability, the (sometimes pious) optimism and the willingness to work within compromised institutions and structures that marked the public lives of a number of the translators—often members of a Black intellectual elite linked to education in rural areas rather than to street culture in the urban milieu of a Sophiatown or an Alexandra. Before dwelling on this aspect of the comparison, however, there is another key consideration to address, which is Shakespeare’s alternate “English” and “multilingual” identities.

English versus Vernac: Linguistic and Cultural Hybridity

Contrasting claims have been made about the *Drum* writers' linguistic identities—that is, the varying attitudes towards English and African languages among their literary personas. On the one hand, there is Gready's (1990) suggestion that “the Sophiatown ‘set’ often appeared to operate blindly in a vacuum,” creating an urban, Anglophile bubble and “rejecting the rich textures of vernacular literature and rural custom” (146). On the other hand, there is Don Mattera's recollection of the inverse dynamic: “A guy like Can Themba, for instance ... Those guys used to talk more English into their ethnic language. Like ‘Ai daai kelele chap huti hey daai kelele, don't come here to me with your what-what, ai quelele kipi Shakespeare boei’” (in Stein and Jacobson 1986, 13).

It is significant that Shakespeare features in Mattera's example. Unchaining Shakespeare from association solely with colonial power is a process in many ways homologous to translation. But this need not only be faithful interlingual translation; more broadly, it may entail adaptation, reconceptualising the original meanings of Shakespeare's plays, or otherwise redeploying the figure of Shakespeare, with all its symbolic weight, to suit the social and cultural texture of the target milieu. This is Themba's strategy in his short story “The Dube Train,” which captures the township lingo of two young tsotsis:

“O, Zigzagza, it's how there?”

“It's jewish!”

“Hela, Tholo, my ma hears me, I want that ten-'n-six!”

“Go get it in hell!”

“Weh, my sister, don't lissen to that guy. Tell him Shakespeare nev'r said so!”

(Themba 2006, 151)

This privileging of tsotsitaal demystifies the enigma that otherwise surrounds Shakespeare, giving him instead a “vernacular” status. To invoke Bakhtin again, we might call this a carnivalisation of language and literature, as the canonical hierarchy placing white Western (and English) culture on top, with Shakespeare as its chief representative, is turned on its head. Perhaps, more accurately, it dispenses with hierarchy altogether: Themba, his *Drum* colleagues, and indeed their Sophiatown subjects—including tsotsis—take on a hybridised identity, escaping into a no-man's-land, an equivalent of Bhabha's Third Space.

Themba not only grafts Shakespeare onto local idiomatic speech but also (again working against the assumption that there might be a language barrier making it difficult for township audiences or readers to comprehend Shakespeare) suggests cultural similarities, or at least a kind of shared collective affect and disposition, especially as far as performativity is concerned:

And is it really an accident, or just another of my exaggerations, that both young Boeta Shakes and the youth of the township hanker after acting and the stage? Dramatization,

posturing, seeking special effects are so much a part of our daily lives that often we are startled when some critic says such and such an African actor was very good. All the time we thought he was just living and we were waiting for him to begin to “act”. Perhaps this was why we necessarily exaggerate. “Living the part”, to us, does not mean seizing a role and making it part of our lives; it means pouring our exuberance into it, and God help that role. No wonder Shakespeare stepped off the boards and wrote the people’s stuff. (Themba 2006, 135)

As Michael Titlestad (2004) has observed, jazz provides a conceptual framework and an expressive analogue for the improvisatory performance associated with the *Drum* writers—both performing as larger-than-life characters in streets and shebeens, and seeing their writing as a kind of performance. By its very nature, the Sophiatown writers seem to suggest, such improvisation encourages a poetics that embeds both the serious and the comic. Shakespeare presented a chance to riff off well-known stories, characters, and lines, but also a chance to show off by reproducing the Shakespearean text verbatim. There was arguably a hint of self-righteousness or even self-importance about the informal performances: from Casey Motsisi’s tabletop declamations to the “backyard strivings” (Themba 2006, 47) of Bloke Modisane, trying to make Shakespeare and Bach still sound sweet among the noises and noisome odours of a shebeen.

There is an ambiguity to the depiction of a character called Caiaphas in Modisane’s short story, “The Situation,” who escapes a deadly fate by speaking Mark Antony’s funeral oration at the behest of a gun-wielding gangster. This was based, it would seem, on actual events; Nkosi affirms that the tsotsis’ “favourite form of persecuting middle-class Africans was forcing them to stand at street corners, reciting some passage from Shakespeare, for which they would be showered with sincere applause.” The *Drum* writers’ Shakespearean recitation is generally recalled as a kind of bravura display for an appreciative shebeen audience, but Nkosi’s description suggests that they were being mocked by the tsotsis for their assimilative aspirations (even if their Shakespearean aptitude was also admired). The *Drum* writers, viewed in this light, were culturally compromised—none more so than Themba, whose liminality bothered him enough to express it in his introspective writings.

While the *Drum* writers were making inroads into Shakespeare and the (English) cosmopolitanism he represented, it has been suggested that their self-knowledge did to some degree suffer impoverishment—as did their imaginative works—from the exclusion of “traditional” African elements. Gready describes this as a “lack of reference to, or sustenance from, the content and form of traditional and oral literature [which] was precipitated by a reluctance to analyse the processes by which rural and traditional cultures were being adapted to an urban context” (1990, 147). In other words, they used Shakespearean expressions and allusions as signifiers of their mastery of forms of knowledge that were privileged and associated with white and Western prestige, at the expense of local norms and values—an extension of the identity of *Drum* magazine itself, which Nkosi candidly described as “a symbol of the new African cut

adrift from the tribal reserve—urbanized, eager, fast-talking and brash” (in Stiebel and Gunner 2006, 298).

This was a necessary strategy of performative opposition to segregationist apologetics and its colonial logic; the emergence of the “new African” was at odds with the implementation of grand apartheid from the 1960s onwards and the aggressive “retribalising” entailed in the Bantustan or homelands system. The linguistic dimensions of this clash are crucial. English was increasingly seen by Black South Africans as a language of liberation, unity, and opportunity. Yet the socio-economic power of English—its cultural capital—was premised on a fundamentally colonial linguistic hegemony. For this reason, as noted at the outset of this article, for many African and Caribbean intellectuals of the post-war decades, decoupling Shakespeare from the colonial project (or subverting Shakespeare’s colonial dimensions) entailed acts of translation.

Notwithstanding Mattera and Themba’s brief snippets of tsotsitaal incorporating the figure of Shakespeare, we must accept that the *Drum* writers’ embrace of Shakespeare was largely Anglophone. Does this leave them stuck in the Caliban paradigm, where “the gift of language” inscribes a power relation in which the subordinate other “is hailed and recognises himself as a linguistic subject of the master language” (Brown 1985, 61)? Was Gready correct in observing that, while the Sophiatown writers’ use of English was “a dynamic contributor to an emergent culture,” it was also “one manifestation of a more general disregard for their inherited tradition” (1990, 146)?

Distiller celebrates the cultural hybridity—the “coconutteness” (Distiller 2012, *passim*)—exemplified by the *Drum* writers’ employment of Shakespeare. This echoes Stuart Hall’s affirmation that hybridity signifies culture and identity as a “presence/absence,” “nowhere to be found in its pure, pristine state but always-already fused, syncretised, with other cultural elements,” which serves to “highlight the dialogue of power and resistance, of refusal and recognition, with and against the dominance of European cultures” (in Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker 2016, 231). Yet Hall also emphasised how the “double-voiced structures constitutive of the colonial experience” result in “radical ambivalence” on the part of the (post)colonial subject, a condition that Brown (1985, 68) applies to *The Tempest*—and, in particular, to Caliban cursing Prospero in the very language taught to him by his oppressor.

Translators and Translations

Those Sophiatown Shakespeareans, the *Drum* writers, may be instructively compared to other Black writers and intellectuals whose response to Shakespeare was not one of literary appropriation or performative recitation in English, but who instead took on the task of translating Shakespeare into African languages. Lest we be too quick to fit the *Drum* writers’ appropriation of Shakespeare into the model of the colonial subject who is acutely aware of, but ultimately incapable of reversing, his subservient situation—or to judge them for seeking to register their urbanity by privileging the English language

over indigenous languages—an assessment of the varying circumstances of the translators shows that they, too, were in a double-bind.

It is the figure of K.E. (King Edward) Masinga who connects the two groups. In Gunner's telling (2019b, n.p.), the popularity of the "Friends, Romans, countrymen" speech in Johannesburg—as documented by the likes of Themba and Modisane—may be attributed in part to the influence of Masinga's isiZulu radio drama version of *Julius Caesar*, first broadcast in 1955. The script used for this six-episode series is dated February 1955: the very same month in which the bulldozers rolled into Sophiatown and the forced removals commenced. Paradoxically, the cultural and political significance of the place would grow even as its end was signalled (it was only in 1962 that hollowed-out Sophiatown was finally gone, and cynically renamed "Triomf"). Of course, while Masinga's voice was a familiar one "in the hostels and in the townships of the Witwatersrand" (Gunner 2019b, n.p.), he was mostly based in Durban—so it is not entirely correct to say that he shared the urban milieu of the *Drum* writers. Yet if "the Sophiatown era" commonly describes a period in wider Johannesburg from the mid-1950s into the early 1960s (in other words, the period in which Sophiatown was slowly emptied and flattened), then it would not be inaccurate to say that the voice of this era, as far as radio broadcasts were concerned, belonged to K.E. Masinga.

If we go by the dates provided on the typescripts of Masinga's translations that are housed in the Johannesburg Public Library, by the time Masinga completed his translation of *Julius Caesar* he had already produced at least six other versions of Shakespeare's plays. The earliest of these was probably *The Merchant of Venice*, dated 1952 (although Gunner suggests that they may have been recorded and first broadcast in the 1940s). It is worth emphasising here that Shakespeare was merely one component of a diverse offering created and curated by Masinga—starting in 1943, when he and ethnomusicologist Hugh Tracey produced a musical radio drama based on the folk tale *Chief Above and Chief Below*. It was only after he had "exhausted all the resources of folk tale, Zulu history, Zulu literature ... biblical stories ... 'crime does not pay' serials" and more that he turned to Shakespeare as a kind of content filler (Masinga n.d., n.p.). Masinga had started his career on radio in 1941, taking advantage of wartime anxieties; Gunner (2019a) writes that he managed to persuade white executives at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), which had previously only broadcast in English and Afrikaans, "that airtime in isiZulu was essential as a means of ensuring that the rumours in the black community of an imminent Nazi victory ... were quashed" (40). Masinga was allowed to make brief daily announcements giving updates on the war. But while "the odds seemed stacked against him," Gunner notes (38), he carefully carved out more and more space for isiZulu on the SABC airwaves. By 1960, when Radio Bantu was launched, he was a national celebrity, referred to by his listeners as "Mangethe."

To achieve this status, Masinga had for years pursued what Gunner calls "balancing acts with his austere and undoubtedly powerful SABC 'masters,'" navigating a "quite

chilling and seemingly unbreachable hierarchy of race” (2019a, 39). No doubt this required compromise—working within the system—and, although the net result was a subversion of the SABC agenda to “control minds, and hold back the liberation struggle” by supplying “endless streams of propaganda to passive black listeners” (Gunner 2019b, n.p.), Masinga’s was at best a subtle rather than a strident form of resistance to apartheid.

Another translator linked to the hostels and mining compounds of the greater Witwatersrand region is K.E. Ntsane, whose novels and poems include vivid accounts of the experiences of migrant workers who had, like him, travelled from Lesotho to work on the reef (in his case, the gold and coal mining town of Springs). Ntsane was not a miner himself but worked as a clerk; having grown up as a herdboys with interrupted schooling, he diligently applied himself to his education and qualified as a teacher (see Lenake 1984; Sebeho 1996). In 1946, he was awarded a scholarship to study further in the United Kingdom, and on his return, he taught in Maseru—then the capital of the crown colony of Basutoland—and in Swaziland. His Sesotho translation of *The Merchant of Venice* was published in 1961; at this time, he was working as Hansard Editor for the Basutoland National Council and as an archivist for the Basutoland government. When Lesotho gained independence, he was well-positioned to take up a more prominent role, and after Leabua Jonathan became the new country’s first prime minister Ntsane was appointed as Jonathan’s press secretary.

Ntsane shared with all the other translators we discuss here a background as an educator. It may be added that Masinga, too, had been a teacher (to record his Shakespeare tradaptations for radio, Masinga recruited his former teaching colleagues to come into the Durban studio on weekends to speak the parts). Ntsane differed from Masinga in that, apart from his sojourn on the mines and his time as a student in London, he represented not the urban energy of Johannesburg or Durban but a more “rural” world—albeit, in the latter part of his career, in the service of newly-independent Lesotho. His was not an uncomplicated role; in 1970, a year after Ntsane started his job as press secretary to the prime minister, Jonathan nullified the election results that would have given his opponents victory, declared a state of emergency, suspended the constitution, and dissolved parliament. From this point on, it was difficult to see Jonathan as anything other than a would-be autocrat running Lesotho as a fiefdom. Of course, Lesotho was in a difficult position, its territory entirely surrounded by the much more militarily and economically powerful South Africa—so it was necessary to placate the Nationalist government to some degree—but history has judged Jonathan as a leader who kowtowed to the apartheid regime even as he sought to rule his own people with a rod of iron. Ntsane’s Shakespearean endeavours are thus compromised by his work as, effectively, spin doctor for a minor autocrat and translator-interpreter in Jonathan’s diplomatic affairs.

As we have written elsewhere, the question of “complicity” hangs over other South and southern African Shakespeare translators of the 1950s and 1960s, despite their often

remarkable achievements as educators, writers, linguists, and cultural activists (Mtsaka 2023, 2026; Thurman 2020, 2025). It is less starkly applicable to a figure like L.D. Raditladi who, in a manner partly comparable to Ntsane in Lesotho, joined the post-war nationalist movements in the then-British Protectorate of Bechuanaland that eventually led to Botswana's independence in 1966 (Raditladi's *Setswana Macbeth* was published in 1968). Prior to this, however, he had climbed the rungs of the British colonial service in the 1930s and 40s. In addition, in a career marked by his involvement in love affairs and other scandals among the chiefs and regents of the royal Khama and Moremi clans, as he found ways of surviving the palace intrigue, he seems by turns to have worked within and opposed colonial systems of oppression.

"Complicity" is a loaded term in a South African context, and one should be cautious of applying it too easily. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that translators of Shakespeare's plays into African languages in the 1950s and 60s were imbricated in the structures and systems of apartheid. In turning our attention to a figure such as Samuel Baloyi, we again pick up the thread of education. Baloyi, who translated *Julius Caesar* into Xitsonga in 1958, was a teacher and school inspector in the then-Northern Transvaal (Limpopo Province). No doubt he saw it as part of his responsibility as an educator to produce materials in the home language of the students and teachers whom he oversaw. Five years previously, he had translated Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* into Xitsonga—a choice of text that suggests the kind of aspirational but also accommodationist politics common among Black liberals of his generation. As a minor functionary of the Bantu Education system, Baloyi could hardly be held to account for its damning effects on generations of Black South Africans. Yet the intersection of the 1950s and 60s surge in African-language Shakespeare translation with the early implementation of Bantu Education must be acknowledged.

The Bantu Education Act of 1953 and subsequent legislation was informed by Hendrick Verwoerd's brazen assertion that if Black children were to be consigned to a life of manual labour, their curriculum and school environment should reflect this. Black schools would become chronically under-resourced and neglected. Yet at first, the notion of "separate but equal" schooling was presented, along the same lines as most apartheid apologetics, as a necessary mechanism for protecting the linguistic and cultural characteristics of different "tribes" or "ethnicities." This spurred phenomena like the translation of Shakespeare into different African languages for learners in suitably divided Black schools.

Bantu Education would reinforce the grand apartheid design of Black South Africans being forced to remain in homelands or Bantustans (apart from much-needed labourers allowed temporarily in or near white areas). Two key translators from the 1950s and 1960s, B.B. Mdledle and C.N.M. Phatudi, were educators who became politicians and took up leading roles in the homelands system. Mdledle had, from the 1920s to the 1940s, sought to oppose the disenfranchisement of Black people through various institutional and organisational channels. He was a founding member of the Cape

African Teachers' Association (CATA) in 1921, a regular contributor to publications such as *South African Outlook*—in which he staunchly defended the Cape Native Franchise—and a delegate at the All-African Convention conferences of 1935 and 1936 that aimed to unite Black political opposition to segregation and to legislation such as the so-called Hertzog Bills, which laid the foundation for apartheid. Mdledle also worked with liberal white politicians such as J.H. Hofmeyr and Margaret Ballinger, aiming to find some benefit in the paltry representation of Black people in parliament. By the end of the 1950s, however, he had to abandon this futile hope. He felt, reluctantly, that any influence he might have in the Eastern Cape communities to which he was committed lay in the Bantustan politics of the Transkei—and he threw in his hat with the strongman style of Kaiser Matanzima, a former pupil of his, becoming the Minister of Education in the nominally independent Transkei government in 1963. It was during this period of transition into a new identity, from veteran teacher at Lovedale College to Bantu Education inspector and subsequently Bantustan politician, that Mdledle's isiXhosa Shakespeare translations were published: *Julius Caesar* (1956), *Macbeth* (1959), and *Twelfth Night* (1961).

The homelands were granted varying degrees of nominal independence, but their governments were widely understood to be little more than puppet regimes propped up and kept firmly in place by Pretoria. This was the limitation that faced C.N.M. (Cedric Nemedi Makepeace) Phatudi, who attained the position of Chief Minister of the Lebowa Bantustan in 1973. Prior to this, his career trajectory followed a recognisable pattern: first a teacher, then a school principal, then a supervisor of schools, then a school inspector—and president of the national body of Inspectors of Bantu Education to boot—Phatudi became Lebowa's Minister of Education in 1968 and remained in that role until it was ostensibly granted self-governance in 1972. Having first published his Sepedi translation of *Julius Caesar* in 1966, Phatudi ensured that the text was widely circulated (second and third editions were published in 1971 and 1982); he would also publish translations of *I Henry IV* and *The Merchant of Venice* as Chief Minister.

Phatudi was known to be a vocal critic of the apartheid government and claimed that he initially opposed Lebowa's putative independence; he understood separate development to be only a stage in a longer process of South Africans of different race groups recognising their "interdependence" (see Phatudi and Kapuuu 1974; Phatudi in Bopape 1998, 93). While it would be simplistic to view him as a stooge, there is no doubt that he remained beholden to the South African state. Yet his translations—like those of Mdledle, Baloyi, Ntsane, and others—were undertaken in service to a language, culture, and heritage that was deeply undermined in the colonial and apartheid eras. And they remain, today, valuable not only as texts of interest to language and literature scholars but also as potential resources for educators seeking to promote MTBBI (mother tongue-based bilingual instruction) and, indeed, for creative practitioners exploring multilingual Shakespeares for new audiences.

Conclusion

Two broad patterns emerge. The *Drum* writers' citation, recitation, adaptation, and appropriation of Shakespeare contained elements of multilingualism or translanguaging but were largely English-language expressions of their status as "New Africans," marked by cultural hybridity in opposition to "tribalisation." Most of the Shakespeare translators of the 1950s and 60s, while affirming African languages as languages of learning and teaching, as well as of creative practice, consciously or otherwise created educational resources that fitted into the early apartheid segregationist vision.

The translators tended to be from an older generation, or at least imagined their contributions to Black intellectual, cultural, and political life within older models—the clearest example being B.B. Mdledle, whose moderate attempts at political reform were situated within a socially conservative (Christian) belief system and the principles of educational institutions such as Lovedale College. As an example of this generational divide: Mdledle was General Secretary of the Cape African Teachers' Association (CATA) in the 1920s; by the 1950s, this organisation was pairing up with the Transvaal African Teachers' Association (TATA), of which a young Es'kia Mphahlele was one of the local office-bearers, to build popular resistance to the Bantu Education system in which Mdledle was then an active participant (see Lodge 1983, 120). Mphahlele, of course, would soon find that he could not remain in the classroom and abandoned teaching in favour of *Drum*.

If there was a certain self-seriousness in Mdledle et al. undertaking their translations because of the focus on education, the *Drum* writers' humour and popular style freed Shakespeare in the shebeen and in the street from the rigid manner in which his plays were presented to school pupils. Although Motsisi was taught Shakespeare's sonnets by Themba at high school, the *Drum* writers portrayed Sophiatown's residents as understanding the issues Shakespeare dealt with through their improvised responses to his work in the carnivalesque mode, beyond the strictures of academic training. The hedonistic rebellion—and, occasionally, the cynicism—of Sophiatown, along with the collapsing of social hierarchies in urban Black communities, was at odds with the respectability associated with the translators, who tended to be part of a Black social and academic elite.

The latter characterisation might also apply to a translator not yet discussed in this article, M.O.M. Seboni, whose Setswana *I Henry IV* (1952) was the first published African-language Shakespeare translation after those of Sol Plaatje (Seboni also completed *The Merchant of Venice* in 1961). He was a lecturer at Fort Hare University in the 1950s and 60s, a position that carries a certain cachet because of that university's reputation as the academic home of Black resistance to apartheid. But what was his motivation in undertaking his Shakespeare translations? The foreword to Seboni's *I Henry IV* (1952, 3) alludes to a previous version of his text in circulation in schools, and makes it clear that the present edition is intended for use in Setswana schools of the Transvaal (this was prior to the passing of the Bantu Education Act). The prefatory

material to Seboni's *Merchant*, too, addresses itself to boys and girls reading the book in a formal learning environment (1961, v). Yet Seboni evidently wanted to achieve more than present the learners with a textbook; his peritexts enjoin them to follow Shakespeare's example and write their own plays in Setswana, imagining a creative life beyond the curriculum.

The same applies to O.L. Sibusiso Shange's preface to his 1954 isiZulu *Merchant of Venice*. Shange situates himself and his enterprise in an educational setting (St Augustine's High School in the coalmining town of Dundee in KwaZulu-Natal), but expresses his confidence that readers will become performers: selecting scenes, dressing in costume, delivering their lines in a modern way, entertaining an audience, and thus avoiding loneliness or boredom ("Futhi asingabazi nakungabaza ukuthi amaciko akithi okusina ayozikhethela izahluko ezithile, azivathele ngemfanelo, azidlale ngesimanje, ajabulise ababukayo, achithe nesizungu"; Shange 1954, 5). Here we are not that far, after all, from the *Drum* writers' Sophiatown Shakespeare.

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