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A South African Artist in the Age of Apartheid

In the words of his lifelong friend Mongane Wally Serote, Thami Mnyele's "life, his presence, was a series of little actions, soft-spoken statements, that have accumulated into profound meaning."[1] In *Art and Revolution*, Diana Wylie sets out to unpack the meanings of those small actions, to tell Mnyele's story, and to rescue his life from "ignorance" and "indifference" (p. 1).

Mnyele, struggling to find his way in South Africa, crossed into neighboring Botswana in 1979, and more or less forsook his dreams of becoming an artist when he joined the African National Congress (ANC) in exile there. Seven years later, aged thirty-seven, he was one of twelve people killed by South African Special Forces in the now infamous June 14, 1985, raid on Gaborone. Wylie, researching her PhD in Gaborone in the summer of 1980, came upon an exhibition of Mnyele's drawings in the Botswana National Museum and Art Gallery where they had a profoundly moving effect on her. Soon after, she met the artist and they became friends. As she recounts in the book's preface, when she heard of Mnyele's death five years later, she "wrote down everything I could remember him having said" (p. 1). Those words and her memories, filled out with information gleaned from scores of interviews and wide-ranging archival research, are gathered together in *Art and Revolution* to provide not only a remarkable portrait of an individual and his work but also a richly nuanced rendering of a crucial period in South Africa's history, brought to life from the point of view of one of its lesser-known, yet significantly knowing, players.

The short span of Mnyele's life–1948 to 1985–mirrored the trajectory of institutionalized apartheid in South Africa. In 1948, the Afrikaner-led National Party won political power and began to introduce the structures of apartheid legislation. By1985, the first tentative and covert steps toward negotiating a settlement between the ANC and the South African government, which would lead to the rapid unraveling of apartheid, began.[2] Bringing her considerable experience and skills as a historian to the task, Wylie plots Mnyele's life against this background. When details of the life are scarce, Wylie invites the reader to imagine them by vividly invoking details of the times. So, for example, while few facts are known about Mnyele's schooling in the rural area of Makapanstad, north of Pretoria, Wylie has delved into the era's school textbooks to construct a convincing impression of Mnyele's classroom experience in the late 1950s. One of the earliest legislative moves of the National Party government was the Bantu Education Act of 1954, designed to ensure not only separate educational institutions for blacks and whites but also the eternal suppression of black intellectual aspirations and the restriction of blacks to the roles of peasants, servants, and laborers. In school, black children were subjected to a litany of their own inferiority.

Mnyele was born into the urban environment of Johannesburg's Alexandra Township, a scrappy but vibrant neighborhood where some blacks, Mnyele's family among them, owned land and where, prior to 1948, an aspirant black middle class rubbed shoulders with sharp-edged gangsters. Wylie, who writes discursively yet with great precision, compacts into the book's short first chapter a lively portrait of Alexandra Township, an outline of Mnyele's family background, and a cogent account of Bantu Education and her protagonist's schooling and his dawning attraction to expressing himself through drawing.

Equally succinctly the second chapter covers the decade that preceded Mnyele's return to Alexandra from his rural high school in 1965. Here, Wylie outlines both the mounting repression of the government's apartheid policies and the rise of African resistance through two principal political movements, the ANC and its offshoot the Pan African Congress (PAC), formed in 1959. Both

movements were banned in 1960 and their leaders forced underground or into exile. With a fine-grained yet light touch that lands on just about every key point of the political events of those years, Wylie sets the scene for Mnyele's adult life–a particular life that nevertheless mirrored the experience of thousands of young South Africans in the 1960s and 1970s.

The four central chapters of the book detail Mnyele's political and artistic maturation. It is a depressingly familiar story: the young African urbanite, with an acute intelligence, a strong ethical core, a love of music, and a yearning to become an artist, who, doomed to a bleak future by the overwhelmingly powerful machinery of a pernicious state system that provided a perfunctory education, a dearth of social and economic opportunity, and an iron fist that could and would trample the individual with scarcely a nod to basic human rights, resorts to a life of militancy and revolution. Wylie's telling peels back the layers of this conventional tale to tease out the particulars of Mnyele's story.

Music in the guise of American jazz was a catalyst that introduced Mnyele to the artistic life that hummed beneath the squalor and cacophony of Alexandra Township. It was there in 1970 that he was introduced to Serote, his near contemporary and a determined and aspiring writer. "Both young men," Wylie writes, "were hungry to express themselves and to see their lives from a broader perspective" (p. 35). Wylie captures Serote's bold and charismatic personality that inspired Mnyele, gave shape to his nascent political instincts, and led him into the wider world of black and white radical intelligentsia in Johannesburg in the late 1960s and 1970s. The third chapter provides a rich account of the heady artistic and intellectual life into which Mnyele was plunged at this time. Wylie outlines the Johannesburg art world and the isolated interstices in it through which black artists, for whom there were few opportunities, now and then emerged. Mnyele's work slowly gained a measure of recognition as he was included in exhibitions and invited to create the cover for Serote's groundbreaking volume of poetry, *Yakhal' Inkomo*, in 1972. Mnyele and his young artist, writer, and musician friends also created their own opportunities, and Wylie here introduces the less well-known, and perhaps largely forgotten, histories of theater groups like Mhloti (Tears), and MDALI (Music, Drama, Arts and Literature Institute) that combined performance with politics and brought both entertainment and consciousness raising to the townships around Johannesburg in a period of activist theater partly inspired by the successes of civil rights movements in the United States. Political events and the unrelenting fact of state oppression and control were impossible to separate from social and artistic life.

Groping to find his voice as an artist, Mnyele, who was working as a graphic artist at the Johannesburg education nonprofit Sached, was offered funding to study at the Rorke's Drift Arts and Crafts Center in rural Natal in 1973. It was one of the few places black artists could learn a few skills and Mnyele took up the offer only to be deeply disappointed. At Rorke's Drift he felt removed from urban life and the pulse of the country's urgent debates and conflicts, and isolated in a world that came nowhere near what he instinctively knew a true art school ought to be. Mnyele would remain a firm believer in skills training for artists, setting for himself and others stringently high standards. Even as he turned more directly to the life of a revolutionary, where art for art's sake was a luxury to be put aside until the goals of social and political revolution had been achieved, he wrote in a review of an exhibition of South African artist Bongiwe Dhlomo's work in Botswana in 1982: "We hail the fighting communities that inspire Bongiwe's work. To Bongi herself I must point out though that her pictures need more concentrated working. The pictures deal with serious issues of our lives but this is done with somewhat half-heartedness…. That rubbish bin and the figure next to it … are mere shapes, dead images. There's no dust, nor feeling thereof, no wet … no smell…. There are ways … of improving our work…. We must change our understanding towards the profession. We must read, research, travel, and practice…. We must convene and attend seminars, workshops…. These are the actual things which inform and nourish our artwork."[3]

Mnyele cut short his time at Rorke's Drift and returned to Johannesburg and his work at Sached in 1974. The experience had changed him, and despite his disenchantment, he appears to have acquired enhanced draftsmanship skills. His work began to take on a new authority, at once subtle and intense. He experimented with new materials and techniques to infuse his works with sensations–the atmospheric feelings and smells of dust and dampness that he would later recommend to his colleague Bongiwe.

Mnyele's world as well as his art was changing in the mid-1970s. Serote left Johannesburg to take up a Fulbright Scholarship in New York, leaving Mnyele to explore new avenues of camaraderie and intellectual support. On the plus side, Johannesburg eased its local apartheid laws and the city's museums and libraries were opened to blacks, allowing artists like Mnyele to experience the collections of the Johannesburg Art Gallery and

to explore the holdings of the municipal art library. Almost simultaneously, the capricious workings of the authorities were manifested in the arrest and solitary confinement for almost a year of Mnyele's longtime Mhloti and MDALI associate, Molefe Pheto, and although the circumstances were not clear, Wylie reports that Mnyele himself was arrested and held by the police for several days around this time.

The chapter that recounts these events is fittingly titled "Trying to Live an Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times." As Wylie chronicles the complexity of the political movements, the individuals, and the events that were bearing down on Mnyele as he struggled to maintain a state of equilibrium in his personal life, the reader is drawn into the escalating tensions that would peak in the Soweto riots of June 16, 1976. This watershed crisis was the impetus that drove a generation of young South Africans into exile and deeper politicization, as their hopes of achieving freedom at home seemed to fade ever further into a distant and indefinite future. As tension and police brutality continued to ratchet up, Mnyele faced personal highs and lows. His work was becoming increasingly richer in form and content and gaining greater attention than ever; he was in love and would soon marry his beautiful and accomplished young girlfriend. Their baby girl was born in April 1977. Only months later the country was again rocked by a defining event–the death, while in police custody, of charismatic thirty-year-old Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko. Mnyele, who, a year earlier, had traveled to Durban to hear Biko speak, now traveled to Biko's funeral in the eastern Cape. Like so many others he was pressed to examine his own priorities. In short order his marriage would begin to disintegrate, and, after hearing that Serote had left New York and was living in Gaborone, Botswana–a city fast becoming a nexus for exiled ANC members–Mnyele quietly crossed the border from South Africa to Botswana in August 1979. He was not yet an ANC member, and had no education as a revolutionary, but his fateful decision was clear.

Wylie draws a touching and sympathetic portrait of a young man facing the unknown with considerable uncertainty. Her own firsthand experience of Gaborone at this time allows her to give the reader a close-up account of the town and its communities of locals, ex-pats, and exiles. Incongruously for its location in an arid, dusty, landlocked African landscape, Gaborone, with a population of roughly sixty thousand in 1981, had been created rapidly on a "garden-city" model as the country's new capital by the departing British on the eve of Botswana's independence in 1966. Wylie describes how Mnyele, at first tentatively and then with growing assurance, participated in the work of the arts collective Medu (the Pedi word for "roots"), newly founded by South African exiles and led by Serote, along the familiar lines of Mhloti, his Alexandra Township group. Although Mnyele (secretly as was often the case) joined the ANC soon after he arrived in Gaborone, Medu, despite its radical political agenda, was not openly affiliated with the ANC, which at the time had no cultural component. Wylie devotes the book's fifth chapter to a finely shaded discussion of the ANC in exile in Botswana and of Medu, the layers of its operations (which ranged from education and involvement with the local community to political activism in the aid of the struggle for freedom in South Africa) and to the diverse actors and personalities and their roles in the organization.

She addresses, too, the exigencies that would test the daily life of the revolutionary that Mnyele was becoming. With his resolve and commitment to his own art and to music unshaken, Mnyele faced the inevitable crossroads of the revolutionary artist: the necessity of sacrificing his personal needs and his own creative imperative to the greater good, of putting his life on indefinite hold as he became a player in the events that would determine his fate and the fate of his cohorts. Life does not always cooperate, and Mnyele's life became a tangle when, having all but given up his wife, Naniwe Mputa, and their baby daughter, he discovered that his new girlfriend, Rhona Segale, visiting from South Africa and soon to become a fellow exile, was pregnant. Mnyele's own health problems were an added complication. Wylie, perhaps in deference to these women and perhaps because the motivations remained hidden from her, does not delve very deeply into these relationships, but two marvelous photographs of Mnyele with each of his wives give the reader a glimpse into the intimacy and pleasure that human relationships held for him (pp. 92, 184).

About a year after the successful exhibition of his work at the Botswana National Museum and Art Gallery in 1980, as Wylie reports, "Thami unambiguously threw in his lot with the movement" (p. 147). The sixth chapter chronicles Mnyele's conversion from artist to full-fledged revolutionary at a time when the ANC's military wing, Umkhonto weSizwe (MK), was becoming bolder and more effective in guerilla attacks within South Africa. These successes in turn elicited ever more draconian and desperate reactions form the South African government. Still working through Medu, Mnyele turned to creating unambiguously political art–usually posters promoting the cause of the ANC and openly antagonistic to the South African government–that was rou-

tinely smuggled into South Africa via clandestine but well-traveled cross-border routes. His growing revolutionary stature was fueled by his rise in Medu.

By the time of the historically memorable and significant Medu-organized Culture and Resistance festival that took place over several weeks in June and July, 1982, Mnyele was the movement's chairman, and he played a prominent role in the events that brought together, in Gaborone, artists, musicians, actors, and writers from the exiled community in Botswana and a broad swath of their radical and socially committed South African counterparts. Wylie provides a valuable record and a lively account of this momentous occasion with its centerpiece five-day festival of performances, music, and panel discussions. In defiance of the South African government, which was certainly keeping a close watch on events, the eight hundred delegates–multiracial, multiethnic, and multinational, exiled openly ANC-affiliated "comrades" and citizen opponents of the government still living inside South Africa–"generated an ecstatic air" (p. 157). Although I did not participate, I remember well the excitement the festival generated in South African university art circles at the time. The presence of luminaries, like writer Nadine Gordimer and long-exiled musicians Abdullah Ibrahim and Hugh Masekela who debated the current status of South African arts and the hoped-for future, once revolution had been accomplished, underscored the significance of the festival. Wylie provides a summary of Mnyele's own (unpublished) conference paper, "Observations on the State of the Contemporary Visual Arts in South Africa," to suggest that "glimmers of his own dilemma and unresolved contradictions show through" his statement of firm commitment to the goals of the liberation movement in South Africa, and that he was "still reluctant to surrender his artistic vision entirely to the revolution" (p. 162).

One of the most poignant and authentic moments in Mnyele's biography came for me in the account of his December 1982 visit to Amsterdam as Medu delegate to Culture and Resistance's European counterpart festival organized by the Dutch antiapartheid movement–a highly charged, partisan event. On a visit to the Rijksmuseum, "he wanted to see only one painting–Gerard Dou's seventeenthcentury portrait of Rembrandt's mother. He stood in front of the old lady's image for about 20 minutes, drinking in the fur-swaddled figure staring devoutly at an illustration of the gospel" (p. 166). Mnyele mailed a postcard of the painting to his mother in South Africa and she later showed it to Wylie. The artist had written, "Dear Mum, when I went to the Rijksmuseum in this city of Amsterdam I was deeply moved by this painting.... I was moved very, very, deeply, and felt very humbled to a point of near tears. And I thought, and I thought of you, Love, Mnyele" (p. 166). Here, Mnyele's voice is heard clear as a bell at a critical juncture in his life, and it captures a depth of expression and awareness that leads Wylie to interrogate the paradoxes of his position as artist and revolutionary.

Joining the revolution had made Mnyele a player–a stronger and more confident person. Medu was giving his life a sense of purpose. At the same time, he was opened to a heightened sense of the power of personal expression, even though as Wylie, spotting the irony, puts it, he was viewing "oil paintings of venerable burghers who had made fortunes shipping goods to South Africa and the East Indies, irrevocably changing the lives of Thami's ancestors" (p. 167). Wylie suggests that Mnyele resolved these contradictions and bolstered his position through his reading of the utopian promises of the Marxist cultural historian Ernst Fischer, and came to believe that violence was "the necessary prelude to bringing about a new human centered, because collective, society" (p. 168). Yet the revolution was slow in coming and in the meantime South Africa was intent on destabilizing her neighbor countries in order to limit the growth of revolutionary movements close to home.

In 1983, now joined by Segale, mother of their toddler son who had been left in the care of her mother in South Africa, Mnyele traveled to Angola for military training. Wylie draws a revealing picture of the ANC training camps in Angola, beset by tensions, tough conditions, and low morale among the rank and file. As her story builds, she tells in page-turning prose how, back in Gaborone, knowing they were under constant surveillance by South African agents, Mnyele and Segale and their ANC comrades lived the revolution, constantly looking over their shoulders for South African government stooges and informers. Having tracked down and interviewed several lesser-known participants in the drama of the times, Wylie uses their testimony to show Mnyele as a resolute recruiter, teacher, and hands-on trainer of converts to the cause, despite his vulnerable inner core that seems never very far from the surface. With her storyteller's nose close to the ground, she enlivens this history's big picture in a compelling and fascinating narrative of its foot soldiers.

As South Africa signed political accords with neighboring Swaziland and Mozambique, Botswana's position as an ANC haven became increasingly tenuous and Mnyele's posters became increasingly strident and militant. In May 1985, warned by the Botswana government

that their lives were in danger, many ANC exiles, Mnyele among them, prepared to leave Gaborone. Mnyele and Segale were hastily married and less than two weeks later Segale left for Zambia where Mnyele was to follow her. As the chapter of Mnyele's life in Gaborone draws to a close, the reader is given a sense of the impending dénouement.

Wylie begins her seventh chapter with the words "Thursday, 13th June 1985" and she relates the events of the fateful day in slow motion and close-up detail. Focusing first on Mnyele as he goes about his day, making his preparations to leave Gaborone, Wylie moves on to recreate with rising tension the movements and motivations of the twelve victims-to-be so that they become individuals and not merely names. She likewise describes the convoluted hierarchies of the South African police with its militarized so-called Special Branch; the army (South African Defence Force or SADF); and the intelligence service, which, in consort, would plot and, through their operatives, carry out the elaborately planned coming raid, code-named Operation Plexi. Although some of the sources are unreliable and even contradictory, Wylie has gone to extraordinary lengths to piece together an accurate account of the night's events. Having begun the chapter by introducing the fated twelve victims, she returns to describe their slaughter, carried out by a force of sixty-three heavily armed South African soldiers and police who crossed the border secretly (most likely, although not proven, under the averted gazes of the Botswana authorities). Starting with Mnyele, felled down by heavy machine gun fire within seconds of desperately racing out the back door of his house in the early hours of June 14, Wylie describes one by one the fates of each of the eleven other victims. It is a chilling account, and Wylie tries to make sense of it by examining the states of mind of the perpetrators and their handlers, the all-round confusion that accompanied the night's events, and its repercussions and outcomes.

Wylie's story does not end with Mnyele's death. Three codas could almost form a separate book, or at least discrete journal or magazine articles. They cover the exhumation of Mnyele's remains and their ceremonial reburial in South Africa in 2004 (in a final chapter titled "Where is Home?"), Wylie's quest to discover his killers' motivations (in an epilogue subtitled "The War of Values"), and (in an afterword subtitled "Art and Revolution") a discussion of what a truly political art might be. In each of these vignettes, the book is directed to specific questions: "Whom did this event [the exhumation and reburial] resurrect"? What could Wylie learn from face-to-face encounters with his killers? And "what might Thami's sacrifice mean?" (pp. 211, 236, 249).

For Mnyele's family–his eighty-four-year-old mother, his former wife, his widow, and his daughter–the reburial brought resolution and a form of reconciliation. For his former comrades who spoke at the memorial service and funeral that followed, it was an occasion to relive the struggle now that change had come. To the politicians, it was an occasion for myth making and jubilation, and a reminder that, even in a newly democratic South Africa, transformation was incomplete and utopia remained elusive. Wylie, who was present at these events, which were two years in the planning and unfolded over four days, provides a vivid and sometimes acerbic eyewitness account.

In seeking out Mnyele's alleged killers, Wylie asks herself what she might hope to learn. She finds two very different men. One, now prospering and hunting animals in place of men, appears unrepentant. The other, apparently deeply introspective, now understands his role as a pawn in the power struggles of others.

Finally turning to South Africa in the twenty-first century, Wylie muses on the outcomes of the history she has written, putting it in the context of two other twentieth-century upheavals–the Russian and Mexican revolutions–and the vexed question of political art. "Revolution" is a big word, to be used with caution, and Wylie interrogates the rhetoric that surrounds it. This line of investigation brings her to speculate on what kind of an artist Mnyele would have been had he lived? The irony that he died as the struggle was on the brink of achieving its goal is not lost on her. Nor is the reality that that goal is not entirely the one of social harmony and community that her hero would have envisioned.

Art and Revolution is neither biography, nor history, nor political theory, although it joins together these genres and disciplines so that the stitches hardly show. It is a book about art and political liberation in twentieth-century South Africa and it introduces readers to a large cast of characters, many of whom would otherwise have remained in the shadows. It is a book crafted around personal memory that interrogates collective memory. It is a story told with both sympathy and dispassion. It is an archive, for Wylie has done the artist's legacy the invaluable service of tracking down widely scattered works, which she presents, illustrates, and analyzes with great care and insight. Most important, it is a book of historical heft that will resonate with those who lived the period and at the same time provide the perfect introduction to the first-time student of South Africa's recent history.

Notes

[1]. Mongane Wally Serote, "Thami Mnyele: A Portrait," *Rixaka: Cultural Journal of the African National Congress*, no. 3 (1986): 4.

[2]. The minister of justice made early overtures to the imprisoned Nelson Mandela in 1985. See Saul Dubow, *The African National Congress* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2000), 97, and white South African business leaders met with the political leadership of the ANC in Lusaka. See Mark Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2007), 502.

[3]. Thamsanqa Mnyele, "Thoughts for Bongiwe," *Rixaka: Cultural Journal of the African National Congress*, no. 3 (1986): 30.

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