

# Making a life with words<sup>1</sup>

N Chabani Manganyi's recently published memoir provides a chronicle of a life of contemplation, action and accomplishment under incredibly difficult circumstances. Manganyi is one of the most significant thinkers of his generation and the publication of this book is timely for a number of reasons. The book appeared in the wake of student-led protests across the country and at a time when universities in the country are under close scrutiny. Some of the critical questions that have been raised about what needs to be put in place in order to truly bring about change in the post-apartheid present and how universities can not only support but lead this transformation are questions that have been at the centre of Manganyi's work for several decades. His descriptions of the numerous stumbling blocks that were placed in the path of black students and academics and of how, in spite of his brilliance, he was treated as subordinate both inside and outside of academia, provide insight into why there are so few black professors at South African universities in the present. Manganyi traces his passage through the multiple challenges of life under apartheid as a black person who uncompromisingly refused to accept the inferior position intended for him by the state. "What is difficult to fathom", he writes, "is how I managed to cope with so many demands as successfully as I believe I did" (p 60). Indeed, Manganyi did far more than cope. The composite picture that emerges through the text is of an extremely determined person with a powerful internal moral compass who found ways to channel his rage against the injustice of his society into a productive force for positive change.

Manganyi's narrative reveals a life-long fascination with the state of exile and this is reflected in his major

## **Kylie Thomas**

Research Associate  
Institute for Reconciliation  
and Social Justice  
University of the Free State  
Bloemfontein

---

<sup>1</sup> Editorially commissioned book review of Manganyi, N C (2016) **Apartheid and the making of a Black psychologist**. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

biographical works, **Exiles and homecomings: A biography of Es'kia Mphahlele** (1983), **A black man called Sekoto** (1996), and **The beauty of the line: Life and times of Dumile Feni** (2012). Like the exceptional subjects of his biographical studies, as a highly accomplished academic his work made it possible for him to leave the country and make a life elsewhere. From 1973-1975 he held a post-doctoral fellowship at Yale University and had he remained in the United States his life-path would have been quite different. As it happened Manganyi returned to South Africa in 1976 to form a Department of Psychology at the newly established Umtata campus of the University of Fort Hare, which became the University of Transkei (Unitra), and he spent the next thirty years working for change within the country. In 1981 Manganyi resigned from Unitra because the university failed to respond to the fact that students were being tortured by Transkei security agents (a period of history that deserves further research). He then took up a position at the University of the Witwatersrand as a “visiting” professor at the African Studies Institute, for, as he notes, “Absurd as it seems today, positions in the premier white psychology departments were not open to people like me in the 1980s and 1990s” (p 62). Somehow, as he notes, in spite of the rage and distress he experienced, he never allowed himself to be consumed by bitterness or to focus solely on his own plight. Instead he cultivated his ability to immerse himself in the stories and struggles of others.

In addition to his clinical psychology practice, his academic research and writing, and his work to actively transform higher education, Manganyi also served as a forensic psychologist and provided expert evidence in many high-profile trials concerning political violence in the country. The chapters of his memoir that focus on this work provide insight into the workings of the courts under apartheid and the life and death struggles that were waged both inside and outside of the courtrooms at a time of intense political struggle. Manganyi writes of how by “the mid-1980s some South African courts had become combat zones in which the biggest prize for human rights activists and defence lawyers was to save the accused from being sentenced to death” (p 105). It was in this context that Manganyi effectively developed the practice of forensic psychology in South Africa. His work interviewing and analyzing the testimonies of the accused fed into his analyses of violence under apartheid. Manganyi’s thinking has always pushed against the bounds of psychology as a discipline in an attempt to grasp the broader historical, social and political factors that shape psychic life. His ground-breaking publications include works that draw on and develop black consciousness philosophy and that use biography to provide “answers to pressing cultural and sociopolitical questions presented to us by the policy of apartheid” (69). His important collection, **Political violence and the struggle in South Africa** (1990), edited with political theorist André du Toit, provides a model for trans-disciplinary approaches to understanding violence in South Africa.

**Apartheid and the making of a black psychologist** comes to an abrupt end with an account of Manganyi's resignation from his position as Vice-Chancellor of the University of the North and his succession by Njabulo Ndebele. The book does not offer a flowing narrative in the manner of a bildungsroman but presents detailed accounts of significant episodes in the life of the author. This fragmented structure may be the result of the way that the book combines an autobiographical narrative with analyses of the context in which such events took place. It may also reflect how apartheid disrupted the coherence of individual life narratives through restricting life choices and freedom of movement and through the multiple forms of structural and physical violence that fundamentally shaped the everyday lives of black South Africans. One is left with a sense of how much was achieved and at the same time a disturbing question remains about what might have been had this life been lived out under less trying circumstances. Certainly the psychological and philosophical complexity of Manganyi's work would have been recognized and celebrated far earlier and far more widely in another time and place. The crude workings of the apartheid system punished rather than rewarded such reflection. The iniquitous effects of racism loom large in this text and the title of the book itself foregrounds the force of apartheid in determining the making of Manganyi's life as a black psychologist. The image that appears on the cover of the book – a photograph of Manganyi – invokes the state of reverie that is included in the title of one of his early collections of essays, **Mashangu's reverie** (1977) and of an important essay included in the collection, "The violent reverie"<sup>2</sup>. The portrait shows Manganyi looking into the distance, past the viewer, half his face illuminated and half in darkness. The image captures his depth of vision and at the same time conveys something of the wound of apartheid. Hopefully the publication of this book will serve to introduce Manganyi's work, particularly his analyses of violence and the psychic effects of life under apartheid, to a new generation of thinkers who will recognize its significance for helping us to chart our way beyond this painful past.

## References

Manganyi, N C (1977) **Mashangu's reverie and other essays**. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.

Manganyi, N C (1983) **Exiles and homecomings: A biography of Es'kia Mphahlele**. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.

Manganyi, N C & du Toit A (eds) (1990) **Political violence and the struggle in South Africa**. Johannesburg: Southern Book Publishers / London: Macmillan.

---

<sup>2</sup> Reprinted in **PINS** in 2011: Manganyi, N C (2011) The violent reverie: The unconscious in literature and society. **PINS (Psychology in society)**, 41, 7-19.

Manganyi, N C (1996) **A black man called Sekoto**. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.

Manganyi, N C (2011) The violent reverie: The unconscious in literature and society. **PINS (Psychology in society)**, **41**, 7-19.

Manganyi, C (2012) **The beauty of the line: Life and times of Dumile Feni**. Sandton: KMM Review Publishing.