

Can Themba: The Making and Breaking of the Intellectual Tsotsi, a Biography.

Siphiwo Mahala.

Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2022. 288 pp.
ISBN 9781776147311.

The biography has become a staple of Wits University Press's catalogue over the past decade. Regina Gelana Twala, Patrick van Rensburg, Richard Rive, and Dorothea Bleek are some of the figures who have seen their life and work be the object of sustained critical inquiry in this series of biographies. Joining this list is Siphiwo Mahala's study of Can Themba, a "Drum Boy" best known for his short stories.

A notable difference between the other biographies and this one is the relative prominence of Themba. Whilst Twala, Van Rensburg, and others are by no means unknown, Themba has a more prominent stature as an oft-anthologised, studied, and re-interpreted figure. However, as Mahala reminds us in the introduction, "reference to [Themba's] biographical background is scant [, and w]here reference is made to

biographical details, there are barely any substantive facts that give an epistemological account” (5). This is what the book seeks to address—both life history in the general sense, and artistic and intellectual history in particular.

Being a creative writer of plays and short fiction that explicitly speak to Themba’s life as well as being an academic, Mahala is particularly well-suited to write this biography of a figure who was equal parts writer and intellectual. It is also this duality that makes the Themba-biography a difficult one to approach. For whilst the biographical genre follows a rather simple rule, i.e., encapsulate the life of a specific figure, the specificities of the figure places certain demands on the researcher. In Themba’s case, the duality demands both an artist and intellectual biography.

In relation to the artist biography, Mahala’s position as a writer and literary scholar allows his research to offer a scintillating synthesis of readings of both historical data and literary texts; with the literary texts being Themba’s and the writers Themba regarded as influential to his own style. Mahala analyses, for example, the influence of Shakespeare on Themba’s formative poetry as a student at the University of Fort Hare, discussing how “[t]he metrical feet and rhyme are typical of the linguistic nuances and the quintessential Shakespearean rhythms” (28).

Literary texts, however, remain a limited source. And here Mahala deserves a great deal of praise. His incorporation of oral history, and in particular his approach to the inclusion of long sections—sometimes entire paragraphs—of oral testimony leads to the book having a feel of immediacy and generosity: immediacy in relation to memory, and generosity in relation to highlighting the sources of memory (rather than hiding them in footnotes and endnotes).

Beyond shaping an intimate relationship to sources, this approach also allows a great deal of complexity to bubble to the surface throughout the book. Speaking on the ‘nature’ of Themba’s intellectualism, for example, Mahala argues that the “closest we can come is to label him a pragmatist, simply because he adapted to different situations and contexts; but this is not always an accurate assessment, as testimonies by people close to him, such as Jean Hart, reveal that he was never afraid of taking unconventional or extreme positions at times” (147). The oral, then, becomes a source for complexity—offering as much intimacy into the memory of those who knew him as uncertainty about how much we could ever truly know of him.

The intellectual biographical dimension of the book is satisfied through Mahala’s discussion of

the concept of the ‘intellectual tsotsi’. As evidence of his stature as intellectual, Themba’s living room in Sophiatown was famously known as the ‘House of Truth’. This reflects the space created therein for probing debate and the fearless pursuit for knowledge. And although it is mostly his time as an adult in Sophiatown that is associated with his ‘intellectual tsotsiship’, Mahala’s narration points to Themba being a leading intellectual amongst his peers throughout his life.

‘Intellectual tsotsi’ is a concept that has been used elsewhere (Anon; Nkuna), but which has not been teased out in a sustained way. The entirety of chapter 12 is devoted to this question and focuses on the concept in relation to Antonio Gramsci’s well-known notion of the ‘organic intellectual’ specifically, and the ‘public intellectual’ more generally. As Mahala notes, Themba ‘fits’ Gramsci’s description of the intellectual in many ways yet diverged from it as well. Notably, whereas Gramsci regarded a fascination with abstract thinking as foundational to the ‘intellectual’, Mahala points to Themba’s groundedness that made him engage more widely than purely through traditional intellectual avenues.

Here I would posit Mahala misses an opportunity to offer a substantive delineation of the ‘intellectual tsotsi’. Beyond drawing on Gramsci’s understanding of the intellectual, Mahala also refers to Mari Snyman’s argument for regarding Themba as a ‘shebeen intellectual’. Where Mahala notes some differences between the figure of Themba as an intellectual and Gramsci’s theorisation, he offers no substantive critique of Snyman’s thesis—which begs the question why ‘intellectual tsotsi’ would have to be used at all. Considering the centrality of this concept in the biography’s title, it is a missed opportunity that could have offered a novel understanding. In a time of township studies, this could have been particularly generative.

Beyond the possibility for Mahala to have demarcated the distinctness of the ‘intellectual tsotsi’ as a figure more clearly, the only other point of criticism I could level at the book is Mahala’s focus on Themba’s reception and legacy in singular terms. Mahala notes in the introduction that a central motivation for writing the book was to provide an account different from the overwhelmingly group-centric approach that dominates studies of the Drum Boys. There is, Mahala convincingly argues, a need to understand Themba in relation to his own history, not only as ‘another’ Drum Boy. At the same time, the individualised focus on Themba, I would argue, leads to statements reflecting

exceptionalism—statements that are, in fact, often true in relation to leading artists and intellectuals who had a similar life trajectory. For example, when Mahala notes that “[i]n yet another paradox, his [Themba’s] passing sparked interest and breathed new life into his oeuvre, thus entrenching his name in the annals of journalism and the literary landscape in South Africa” (5), one only has to turn to a myriad of leading figures in world history, such as Vincent van Gogh, Emily Dickinson, and Franz Kafka, to see a similar pattern unfold. In this sense, a more historicised view of Themba would have benefited the biography.

Despite these criticisms, Mahala’s biography paves the way not only for a historicised understanding of Themba and his work, and, by implication, the lives and legacies of the Drum Boys generally, but offers a rare example of an artist-intellectual biography; a book that marries literary analyses and reflections on intellectual development. That Mahala further draws on rich oral history makes this a uniquely stimulating read. It has the potential to become an important archive unto itself, offering a writerly map for South Africanists working in biography, intellectual history, and literary studies going forward.

Works cited

- Anon. “Can Themba: Intellectual Tsotsi”. *The Journalist*. 2 Sep. 2014. <http://www.thejournalist.org.za/pioneers/can-themba-intellectual-tsotsi/#comments>.
- Nkuna, Kulani. “Intellectual Tsotsi”. *Culture Review*. 12 Nov. 2015. <https://culture-review.co.za/wittie-tsotsi>.
- Snyman, Mari. “Can Themba: The Life of a Shebeen Intellectual.” MA thesis. U Johannesburg, 2003. <https://hdl.handle.net/10210/29>.

Luan Staphorst

Luan.Staphorst@mandela.ac.za
Nelson Mandela University
Gqeberha, South Africa
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4676-4498>

<https://doi.org/10.17159/tl.v60i1.15788>