Maishe Maponya's *Letta*: Exploring Es'kia Mphahlele's African Humanism as a Mediation of the South African Exile Experience

Andile Xaba
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9628-9643
University of South Africa
xabaa@unisa.ac.za

Abstract

Taking Maishe Maponya's biographical play *Letta* as a starting point, in this article, I explore how exiled Black South African artists who moved to North America in the 1950s and 1960s mediated their yearning for home by finding solidarity with their American counterparts. In *Letta*, Maponya constructs a historical narrative based on the singer Letta Mbulu's life to comment on the lives of South African exiles forced to migrate because of apartheid. Unfortunately, Mbulu has not written a biography on her experiences. Due to the nature of close relations while in South Africa and in exile, it is helpful for analysing Maponya's play that Mbulu features in the biographies written by Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela, who also narrate the experiences of a small number of South African artists who formed the core of the exiled group. Upon interacting with Maponya's play, as well as the texts by Makeba, Masekela, and Keorapetse Kgositsile, it becomes apparent that the exile experience was multilayered (both unhomely and strengthened by solidarity in social and cultural interactions). I propose that Mphahlele's philosophy of African humanism can explain how Black South African artists were able to navigate and ultimately harmonise their sense of rootlessness as individual immigrants by being part of a mutually supporting, if modest, community diaspora. This enabled them to create a body of work that is still relevant in South African culture.

Keywords: Maishe Maponya; Letta Mbulu; Miriam Makeba; Hugh Masekela; unhomed; African humanism

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Introduction

Taking Maishe Maponya's biographical play *Letta*[1] (1997) as a starting point, in this article, I explore how exiled Black South African (SA) artists in North America mediated their yearning for home by finding solidarity with their American counterparts when they were forced into exile. During the late 1950s and the early 1960s, the apartheid regime intensified legislation and instituted coercive police action to quell Black resistance against racial discrimination and oppression. Pertaining to the arts in the city of Johannesburg, the authorities sought to dismantle spaces where Black and liberal white people met to collaborate on music, literature, and theatre. For example, the township of Sophiatown, where multiracial socialising occurred, was destroyed to stop Black and white people from mixing. Between 1955 and 1960, Black people were forcibly removed to Meadowlands (which became part of Soweto later). Segregation laws affected arts spaces, such as the Bantu Men's Social Centre and Dorkay House, which fostered multiracial social interactions and artistic collaborations. For Black people, these spaces meant that they could largely be economically active without being in a subordinate master/servant role. More importantly, Black people could produce arts that could be disseminated to the wider South African public and the media. In music, this meant that singers like Letta Mbulu, Miriam Makeba, and Dolly Rathebe received the attention of local recording producers and international film directors.

The authorities squeezed Black people from Soweto (the most populous township nearest to Johannesburg) and from so-called "white areas" to contain the Black population in reserves or homelands. In defiance of forced settlement and racial oppression, a steady flow of teenagers and artists in their early twenties emigrated from South Africa, legally, if they could acquire a passport. With some leaving to perform in the musical *King Kong* (1959), most could not return to South Africa due to their political beliefs and the authorities' swift punitive action to cancel their passports. Sowetan Letta Mbulu (born in 1942) left in 1965 when she was 23 years old and returned 27 years later. Maishe Maponya (1951–2021) wrote the play *Letta* in 1997, five years after Mbulu's return to South Africa. In effect Maponya's dramatisation of Mbulu's life is retrospective and is concerned with Mbulu's exile life in the United States, particularly in Manhattan and California, the cities in which Mbulu lived and worked.

In *Letta*, Maponya constructs a historical narrative about the singer's life as a means to comment on the lives of South African exiles. Unfortunately, Mbulu has not written a biography on her experiences. Due to the nature of close relations while in South Africa and in exile, it is helpful for analysing Maponya's play that Mbulu features in the biographies written by Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela, who also narrate the experiences of the small number of South African artists exiled in North America. This includes the trombonist Jonas Gwangwa as well as Caiphus Semenya (whom Mbulu married on joining him in exile). Although their careers developed individually, I call

1 The play is unpublished and is included in the Maishe Maponya Collection housed at the Unisa Archives.

them the *King Kong* group because they were all in the original production of the musical. They initially settled in New York and sometimes performed together while they were exile.

In addition to sharing similar thematic tropes (expressing resilience against apartheid, foregrounding the humanity of Black people and Black solidarity) in their works, these artists participated in the same events and were linked to the American civil rights movement. For example, the singer Harry Belafonte and the actor Sidney Poitier took a particular interest in the lives of these musicians. I include the work of the poet Keorapetse Kgotsisile in this group because he shared friendships with them.

Makeba went into exile in 1959, Masekela, Caiphus Semenya, and Jonas Gwangwa in 1960, and Kgositsile in 1961. All the artists discussed experienced a sense of being unhomed, and this is overtly and covertly expressed in their creative work. Bhabha's (2006, 14–17) adoption of unhomeliness stems from Freud's conceptualisation of *unheimlich* (translated as "the uncanny") to analyse "secret and hidden" or repressed feelings that may be represented within a social setting or in literary texts.[2] In the representations of unhomeliness, there is a continuum encompassing the mental and physical distress that the exiles experienced, and the lived experiences described through social interaction while in exile.[3] In my discussion I do not emphasise the psychological aspects that may take place in the psyche of the exiled person, but I rather foreground concrete aspects of human interaction, as Bhabha does sometimes.[4] Bhabha was concerned with analysing the "projection" of "otherness" as may be discerned in literature, hence I am inspired to analyse various texts in this article. He considered representations portraying colonial subjects, and how the denial of one's nationhood may be expressed as geographical displacement, which may be articulated as feelings of alienation.[5] The sense of being Black and estranged from immediate society is not often examined as a theme in the analysis of South African plays. This theme is a factor

2 Freud (2003, 148–154) saw a continuum between the "uncanny of a real experience" or social interaction and "psychologically significant … material." In one example, he writes of "the uncanny" as a "frightening" experience "that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it through being repressed." Thus, Freud's discussion of "the uncanny" is multilayered as it considers the physical and subjective experience of a person. I posit that, although Mphahlele was not influenced by Freud, he does consider psychological elements when framing his concept of African humanism.

3 *Prodigal Daughters: Stories of South African Women in Exile* (edited by Lauretta Ngcobo [2012]), *Always Another Country: A Memoire of Exile and Home* (by Sisonke Msimang [2022]), and *Noni Jabavu: A Stranger at Home* (a compilation of newspaper columns written by Noni Jabavu [2023]) are part of a growing collection of memoirs reflecting on the psychological, social, and the African experience of exile.

4 Writing on the "experience of racist prejudice and injustice" shared by "people of African descent" in the New World (Black Americans) and African communities in the diaspora, for example the South Africans exiled to the United States, Segyun Gbadegesin (in Du Bois 1996, 219) similarly sees exile as an "idea and a movement." His discussion conveys that psychic and material aspects encapsulate the dual nature of exile.

5 For example, Bhabha (2006, 19) analyses Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story* in terms of filial relationships, which are represented as "fractured in the diaspora of exile."

in *Letta* and it is important to explore, as it brings a different layer of understanding to Maponya's works, which have primarily been analysed in terms of the Black Consciousness Movement's resistance to apartheid.

However, one may counter argue that these artists found a receptive Black arts community, which was based and working in New York during the 1950s to the 1970s. The arrival of the South Africans in the United States (US) coincided with the Black Arts Movement (BAM) of the 1960s. One of the aims of the BAM was to celebrate the contribution of Black artists in the face of what artists saw as the marginalisation of Black culture in a white hegemonic society. As Tyson (2023, 318) states, "One of the oldest issues in the Black literary community concerns the social role of the Black writer in a racist society." Naturally these factors encouraged American artists to look at African exiles as partners to help articulate a positive Black identity. Amiri Baraka served as inspiration for the South African artists active in the 1960s (for example Es'kia Mphahlele) as well as those active in the 1970s and 1980s, for example, Maishe Maponya.

Rather than the texts merely describing experiences of being unhomed, I venture that Maponya's play, as well as the texts by Makeba, Masekela, and Kgositsile, offer a more nuanced view of exile, to say that the exile experience was multilayered. It was both unhomely and strengthened by solidarity in social and cultural interactions. I propose that Mphahlele's philosophy of African humanism can explain how the Black South African artists were able to navigate and, ultimately, harmonise their sense of rootlessness as individual immigrants by being part of a mutually supporting, if modest community diaspora. This enabled them to create a body of work that is still relevant in South African culture three decades after they returned from exile.

As represented in Maponya's play as well as in the artistic responses to exile by South African artists in the United States, unhomeliness was experienced as estrangement from one's country and from one's culture, or sense of Blackness. Specifically, the BCM's demand for a "psychological revolution" to engender "Black Pride and ultimately Black unity" informed the themes explored in *Letta* (Arnold 1978, xiv). Makeba, Masekela, and Kgositsile also framed their experiences of exile in the BCM mould, but without representing their experiences in ideological terminology. I propose that the ideas that the liberation of the "subjugated mind under apartheid" and the desire to affirm a Black cultural identity through cultural expression and asserting a sense of Black spirituality (also through cultural expression) were ideals transported into exile by the South African artists. Therefore, a complex set of psychological aspects (concealed feelings of ambiguity between leaving family in apartheid South Africa and the yearning for South Africa once in exile), their Othering, and their efforts to establish bonds of solidarity with their American counterparts influenced their biographical texts, music, and poetry. As a writer, academic, and philosopher, Mphahlele shared these attributes, and these inform his conceptualisation of African humanism.

South African Artists Mediating American Exile

In my discussion of the play and related texts, I draw from Homi Bhabha's theory of unhomeliness and Es'kia Mphahlele's conceptualisations on African humanism. I contrast Homi Bhabha's (2006, 2) theory with African humanism. Bhabha offers a refutation of essentialist (or what he calls "singularities") construction of identity, to introduce an analysis of identity that incorporates both collaborative and oppositional aspects of cultural influence. Bhabha posits that a person's identity is not standardised but is constructed in terms of a person's proximity to what he calls "subject positions," namely "race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale [and] sexual orientation" (2006, 2). A similar understanding may be developed by analysing the representation of one's culture in a biography or fictional work. The purpose of this exercise is to conceptualise culture not as comprising of the same elements for everyone but that it may be seen as comprising contradictory elements. This is an aspect of deconstructive theory,[6] of which Lois Tyson (2023, 372) says that it "defines the self as fragmented pastiche of numerous 'selves' within a world that has no stable meaning and no value beyond that which we assign it." It follows, then, that the analysis of cultural identity "focusses on the fluid, dynamic, hybrid forms" (2023, 372).

For example, the character of Letta in the play may be analysed to see how she negotiates conflicting impulses of belonging to American culture, while also feeling rejected by the same culture during her exile. Thus, culture is neither a fixed entity that is inherited from past social traditions, nor is it captured by homogenous experiences that may be undertaken in a social formation or community. As Bhabha (2006, 13) notes, culture encompasses "the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world—the unhomeliness that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations."

Bhabha (2006, 2) also writes of "in-between" [US] spaces in which there is "collaboration and contestation," and this space provides for

> the emergence of interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated.

The idea that interstices emerge allowing overlaps and "displacements of domains of difference" in the expression of culture in the creative arts may enable a rich discussion of texts from across the genres of music, theatre, and poetry. In this article, I take into consideration the exile experience of South Africans and their interaction with their American counterparts. I do this by exploring how members of a society or nation construe identity (Black people born in South Africa/Africa in comparison to Black

6 In *Negotiating Caribbean Identities* (1995), Stuart Hall also conceptualises Black identity as a conglomeration of fragmented experiences, including their African experience, the history of slavery, and (conditional) integration into modern British society.

people born in the United States) and whether cultural origins were factors in the lived experiences of the South African artists and in the works they created.

Considering the personal circumstance of the South African exiles (as recounted in their biographies) as well as some of the content of their works, the aspect of unhomeliness is also useful to consider in the analysis of *Letta*. In this discussion, unhomeliness refers to exiles' complicated yearning for South Africa and being estranged from their indigenous cultural traditions. Thus the

> negating activity is, indeed, the intervention of the "beyond" that establishes a boundary: a bridge, where "presenting" begins because it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world—the unhomeliness—that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations. (Bhabha 2006, 13)

Following Bhabha, discussing the experience of living in South Africa means incorporating the artists' lived experience in the receiving country and their creative works. For example, on the one hand, Mbulu was lauded for promoting African cultural musical traditions when she sang the soundtrack for the television series *Roots* in 1977, and when she contributed to Michael's Jackson's *Bad* record album in 1987.[7] Along with the recognition that as an indigenous African artist she had firsthand experience and knowledge of African culture to contribute to *Roots* and the *Bad* album, there was also an oppositional impulse in contemporary discourse. Gazit and Belkind (2024, 51) argue that Letta Mbulu and other African migrant musicians in the United States faced expectations to adhere to "scientific authenticity," namely, having to conform to an "ethno-linguistically circumscribed performance that catered to colonial ears and conceptualized African musics as insular, ancient and unchanging—an aesthetic held and policed primarily by (white) music critics."[8] Therefore, following Bhabha's discourse, it can be said that Mbulu and other artists experienced a sense of being unhomed in their lived experience and in how their creative work was received. Since she was invited to participate in high-profile collaborations with American artists, clearly Mbulu was embraced by that community. On the other hand, musically she was "not American" (in the sense that she was not a traditional African American blues or jazz singer). Additionally, she was also not "genuinely African" as her renditions of African songs were sometimes not seen as authentically African.[9] Taking these factors into consideration, I follow Tyson's (2023, 367–369) observation that "[b]eing 'unhomed' is not the same as being homeless. To be unhomed is not to feel at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself: your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee, so to speak." To various degrees, the *King*

7 Both projects were collaborations between Letta Mbulu, Caiphus Semenya, and the American composer and producer Quincy Jones.

8 For a comprehensive discussion, see Gazit and Belkind (2024).

9 Gazit and Belkind (2024, 51) observe that in performing the theme song from the *Roots* television series, Mbulu and other African artists were required to "adhere to conflicting demands of authenticity" and faced rebuke when they were seen to transgress these demands.

Kong group addresses cultural identity and the accompanying crisis as a theme in their works.

Having explored how South Africans may have experienced a sense of being unhomed as exiles, another research question I pose in this article is: What circumstances or personal beliefs contributed to the South Africans' social resilience as refugees and their ability to thrive in the entertainment industry during the 1950s and 1960s in the United States? I propose that Es'kia Mphahlele's concept of African humanism is useful because it helps to explain why the music of South African exiles managed to be largely integrated into American musical styles and performance circuits, despite obstacles. The scholar Lesibana Rafapa notes that it is through his narrative writings that Mphahlele developed and perfected "his concept of African Humanism, with the result that it has been shaped into a coherent, nuanced and lucid theory or philosophy" (as captured by Mike Stainbank's summary of a book on Mphahlele's scholarship titled *May You Grow as Big as an Elephant and Dwarf the Rhinoceros*) (Radithlalo and Lo Liyong 2006, n.p.). I posit that African humanism was a guiding principle for South African artists in exile, although it was not acknowledged as such. I aver that the philosophy permeated how they mediated immigration and its demands, how they represented indigenous African culture in their works, and in the relationships they formed when collaborating with their American counterparts.

Although they had lived in an urban environment while still resident in Johannesburg, the South African artists in the 1950s and 1960s shared a strong rural ethos which they took with them when migrating. Mphahlele outlined his concept of African humanism in his autobiographies *Down Second Avenue* (1959 and 1987) and *Afrika My Music* (1984). I chose these books as primary sources because they relate to Mphahlele's exile experience (Mphahlele went into exile in 1957). I also consulted a collection of his papers compiled in *Eskia: Education, African Humanism and Culture, Social Consciousness, Literary Appreciation* (2002). He outlined his philosophy in essays, literary analysis, autobiography, and short stories while at the same time demonstrating how this ethos shaped and enriched his experience of exile.[10]

While trying to avoid being reductionist, I hereby distil a few elements from Mphahlele's comprehensive theory of African humanism. I isolate elements that relate

10 Other notable sources on Mphahlele are: *In Corner B* (1981b), a collection of short stories; *Ezekiel Mphahlele* (Barnett 1976), a survey of fiction, essays, and a biographical sketch; *The Unbroken Song* (Mphahlele 1981a), a collection of short stories, letters, and poems; *Chirundu* (Mphahlele 1997), a novel; *Exiles and Homecomings: A Biography of Es'kia Mphahlele* (Manganyi 1983); *Down Second Avenue: The Comic* (Ozynski 1988), Mphahlele's biography as a comic book; "The Representation of Humanism in the Narrative Writings of Es'kia Mphahlele" (Rafapa 2005), a dissertation; *Bury Me at the Marketplace* (Manganyi and Atwell 2010), a collection of his letters and interviews; *African Humanism and Character Representation in Zakes Mda's Fiction: A Socio-Cultural and Psychological Approach*, a dissertation by Noel Sicwebu (2021), included is a comprehensive discussion of Mphahle's African humanism as well as a substantial reading list on Mphahlele's works.

to African literature in general and specifically elements that apply in analysing Maponya's biographical play. I argue that these elements help to explain how Maponya integrated aspects from Mbulu's life (her South African home and exile experience) and analyse the representation of these elements in relation to the play and related texts.

A text that ascribes to African humanism may address spirituality. Mphahlele's beliefs originated from his rural upbringing in Lebowakgomo during the 1930s. It was important to capture the indigenous experience, which he formulated as an artistic expression of *seriti*, a spiritual and phenomenological experience, or "having your shadow noticed" in one's social community or by counterparts in the arts (1984, 21–22). He explored the representation of supernatural elements as well how authors incorporate African cosmology in literary texts. In one example, he (1984, 18) contemplated writing about how African folktales depicted violence visiting ancient communities where these occurrences are explained as supernatural phenomena (in that community). He applied the same principle when writing about the death and violence that occurred during anti-apartheid protest action in the 1970s. Since the collective experience of being an African is one of the main aspects of his theory, it follows that the conglomeration of the personal experiences or "the song in human experience" is one of the elements defining the literature of African humanism (Peter Thuysma in the introduction to *Chirundu* [Mphahlele 1997, x]). Mphahlele presents his writing on African cosmology as a personal encounter with the universe. It may be composed of "pitch darkness, riotous moonlight, night sounds, boulder-heaving rivers, orchestrated by stories about giants and huge snakes before which man humbled himself" (Mphahlele 1984, 2). He may also formulate meaning about the universe from the specific locale of "Basotoland."[11] He (1959, 184) writes:

> I stood one night a few yards away from the foot of a hill … I scoured the sky with my eyes; in my fancy I raked the stars together, leaving a sieve in the velvet sky. Then I collected them and splashed the sky with them. Some of the stars were pulverized in transit and chalked the blue with a milky way.

In this way, literature dealing with Africans may be rooted in an African worldview (1984, 21–22). He formulated this view as expansive since it incorporated his reflections on the rural landscape (corporeal aspects of traditional African day-to-day life) as well as indigenous knowledge. In literature, he called for the exploration of the "native landscape," where he emphasised that the lived experience of Black people and in their artistic expression were sustained by a traditional sense of community (Mphahlele 2002, 329–339).

Mphahlele also valued the influence of canonical Western writers on African literature, specifically his writing. This influence was spread across novels and plays examining socialist themes and philosophy from the Soviet Union, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Mphahlele stated that he admired writings by Fyodor Dostoevsky and

11 The colonial-era name of Lesotho.

Maxim Gorky, William Faulkiner and Ernest Hemingway as well as William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens. Here he was not concerned with examining similarities or differences (or "interstices," overlaps, and displacements) between his writing and theirs. He (2002, 322) did not see their influence as disrupting his Black or African expressive voice. He stated that African culture has "the capacity to contain diversity, to accommodate alien cultures, [and] to adapt" (322). In this way his view was that African humanism represented a critique of Western culture, rather than a rejection of it. Mphahlele saw African literature as a starting point from which to analyse and navigate the Black lived experience in a Western-centric world and for Africans to share their ideas and thereby influence the world. He (1984, 16) noted:

> [As a teacher] I was constantly asking myself the questions relating to the value of poetry for me and my students, and for the township culture we were sharing—a culture that was very much an assertion of the human spirit fighting for survival against forces that threatened to fragment or break it. Of what use was poetry in a social climate that generated so much physical violence? In a life that resisted any individual creative efforts, a social climate that made the study of literature, particularly in a foreign but official language like English. … It was the full recognition of these factors by students and teacher that conditioned the love we developed for literature. A love that had to be self-generated, given all the hostile external factors.

Mphahlele anticipated the now widely accepted value of developing scholarship that decolonises (literary) epistemologies. For him, African humanism was a way to express his independence as a scholar, and he also saw the application of African humanism (in the academy) in a practical manner. Therefore, expressing an "independence of mind" also meant that Africans may devise concrete plans enabling them to

> get to know ourselves, our continent, through a study of African history, religion, cosmology, literature and the arts, before we move to other world areas of knowledge, through a combination of our cultural resources and others at the higher levels of education. (1984, 209)

He was speaking of a nuance beyond teaching. As it happens, in postcolonial discourse (to which I argue African humanism is related) the emphasis is on "finding ways to think, speak and create that are not dominated by the ideology of the oppressor" (Tyson 2023, 370). As an African philosophy, Mphahlele adds the dimension that literary works may draw on collective knowledge and wisdom as opposed to only following the teachings of a singular literary figure as may happen in Western-centric approaches to literary theory. Mphahlele (1984, 209) observed:

> We can still find our way to the ancestors who are a vital part of our humanism, that is a state of mind, which is why it can work in urban areas as well as in those rural areas where traditional institutions no longer exist.

Bhabha (2006, 15) sees value in analysing society (and literature) at an "in-between" juncture, a moment that relates "the traumatic ambivalences, of a personal, psychic

history to the wider disjunctions of political existence"; in contrast, Mphahlele favoured a concrete formulation of the "psychic experience" of the subject's (or Black person's) experience of the world. I argue that it is useful to consider both propositions as they may help to explain different aspects of the Black South African exile experience. This is because both theories emphasise the link between society and analysing literary texts. As if supporting Mphahlele, African American scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. asserted the value of "exploring and reclaiming our [cultural identity] before we critique it" (as quoted in Tyson 2023, 319).

Mphahlele (1984, 248–249) explained his theory in this way:

> I am a confirmed African humanist … The difference between me and western humanists is that I cherish the African's belief in the Supreme Being as a vital force, a dynamic presence in all organic matter and in the elements, in Man, where those of the western world feel uneasy with the belief of the supernatural and dismiss African religion as magic. My God is not a product of Hebraic-Christian culture but of African culture.

He added that his faith is a "poet's religion" and encompasses "awakening" and the "spirit" of Black people to fulfil their unity of vison with the Supreme Being.

Letta: In Dialogue with Makeba's and Masekela's Biographies and Kgositsile's Poetry

Possibly because the play is unpublished, and because it did not deal directly with the theme of Black Consciousness, *Letta* has not received much scholarly attention. The exception is an unpublished doctoral study titled "Political Shifts and Black Theatre in South Africa" by Francis Rangoajane (2011, 36), which focuses on analysing sociopolitical issues in South Africa. Out of Maponya's 13 plays, *Letta* is unusual in that it is a musical and the only work that addresses exile as a theme. It is also unusual because the play was unfinished at the time of his death. The play is in two acts, with the first divided in nine scenes which are concerned with the character Letta's early years in Orlando, Soweto. They trace Letta's early steps to establishing herself as a singer in 1957 when she joined the cast of *King Kong* as a 17-year-old. The play also sets out the political conditions that forced her into exile. The final scene of act one deals with Mbulu's integration into the arts scene in New York. Maponya wrote that he saw the play, in part as a "dedication to the non-South African artists who pledged support for the struggle" (1997, 29).

Although Maponya wrote just two scenes of act two, he left a sketch of the play's envisaged progress, mainly to explore Mbulu's interactions on the African continent while in exile, and then to conclude with her return to South Africa. In this article, I read the play as a conglomeration of experiences of exile, rather than a personal account of an individual singer.

From the vantage of Soweto, the play emphasises the importance of geographical spaces to capture the intersection between the arts and the political situation in South Africa. The play journeys to Modderbee prison, a site where Black prisoners were forced to labour on potato farms in the Transvaal during the 1950s. It is also set in Johannesburg—a city of dualities, between the degradations of petty apartheid (for example, Black performers were only permitted to use the service entrance in venues in which they were performing as "stars") and the opportunity and glamour of the entertainment world. The theme of being a stranger in one's country is illustrated by the scene below in which the character Letta is involved in an exchange with a hectoring chorus. The character mentions MacKay Davashe, a respected 1950s saxophonist.[12] Maponya (1997, 10) writes:

CHORUS: "Nag Pas!!"
LETTA: I do not understand Afrikaans
CHORUS: "Night Special!"
LETTA: That's what I knew
But the manager did not have it
We did not have it either
Terror!
Terror for the musicians

CHORUS: "Open your trunks"
LETTA: Ubhut' Mackay opened the trunks
CHORUS: "Put your instruments together"
LETTA: Ubhut' Mackay instructed us to do as we were told. To follow instructions.
CHORUS: "Nou speel julle!"

As depicted above, the car in which the musicians are travelling is stopped and searched by the police who are enforcing a law prohibiting Black people from so-called white areas after dark. The scene comments on the coercive power displayed by the police. The dialogue, which quotes the police (who are presented as white men) in Afrikaans, underlines the use of psychological intimidation visited on the hapless musicians, who are further humiliated by being forced to play their instruments for the amusement of the policemen.

In its representation of Black characters, the play links the causal psychological and socio-political factors that operated in South Africa and in the United States. This emphasises the unrelenting sense of unhomeliness the characters are seen to be experiencing (Maponya 1997, 19):

LETTA: At home white supremacy
Was no tactic for diplomacy
Battle of the races

12 Davashe wrote *Lakuthson' Ilanga*, the ballad written in isi Xhosa which has become a jazz standard in South Africa.

Black People had no aces
To play their cards well

CHORUS: The world over
It is the same in 1960
Black people in America
Fight for civil rights

In his biography, Hugh Masekela (Masekela and Cheers 2004, 6–11, 134–163) contextualises the impact of apartheid-era events on the lives of South African musicians in exile. Masekela prefaces his memorialisation of home by describing how the "aroma of the soil" during the rainy seasons in "the twisted, rolling hills and valleys of the Mississippi Delta, Georgia, South Carolina or Alabama" invoked South Africa as a spiritual land sustained in his recollections by a "carnival of ethnic dances" that was rooted in the veneration of "their ancestral gods." He also writes of his automatic fear of policemen even when walking in a park in Manhattan. He writes about how the legacy of apartheid was a factor contributing to substance abuse by exiled South Africans. Also illuminating is Masekela's representation of his experiences in the United States where some of his contemporaries at the Manhattan School of Music were surprised by his mastery of jazz, as well as comments in his social circles that his speaking of English was unnatural, "like a white man." At the same time, he became an object of fascination for Black Americans because he came from "wild Africa."

In her biography, Miriam Makeba (Makeba and Mwamuka 2004, 55, 66) describes how the Eurocentric gaze positioned her as a curiosity and a "novelty" in Europe and the United States because of her African looks.[13] Thus Maponya's play is in dialogue with the biographies and artistic output of other South Africans in exile. It draws attention to the fact that Black musicians were, in part, ostracised from their community in South Africa during the 1950s and 1960s as well as in exile. Regarding South Africa, this was because their lives were contrary to the expectations of their immediate community and parents. As an example, in the play Letta's family are suspicious of her chosen career in the arts. Pointedly, "Mambuli [sic]," the character of the mother, castigates Letta, asking, "Has this family not suffered enough…?" because the characters Letta and her brother Vusumuzi are social outliers: she is a singer, and he is a youth activist (Maponya 1997, 4–5, 21).

In this way, the play explores the ambivalence in the 1950s Black community regarding their response to apartheid oppression. There were committed activists in society but also passive community members who accepted segregationist and patriarchal injunctions that prescribed strict social mobility for Black women: From being domestic workers, they could only progress to become teachers or nurses. In the play, the

13 In analysing the representation of her younger self, it becomes apparent that Makeba was exoticised at the Venice film festival, where she received an award for a performance in the film *Come Back Africa* in 1959. She notes that a similar discourse took place in the United States.

confluence of race, gender, and the apartheid state machinery shows the structural nature in which women were oppressed and how a character like Letta might be seen as not quite fitting in Black and white society. Following Tyson in her analysis of novels dealing with unhomely characters (2023, 389), I may say that the characters of Letta and Vusumuzi are estranged because their actions "have placed them outside the circle of their own communities." Tyson adds that literary texts may represent "the psychological and historical complexities" as aspects of their characters. As happens in *Letta*, ambiguous renderings of the way in which Black people resisted apartheid "reveal the ways in which historical reality is not something that happens just on the battlefield or in the government office. Rather, historical reality comes into our homes and affects our personal lives in the deepest possible ways" (2023, 389).

When the action of the play shifts to New York, it represents the lives of the South Africans in a more convivial manner: The dialogue between the characters (Letta and Caiphus) is shorter, giving a brisk progress of action on stage which mirrors the city life of the characters. In the representation, the characters are welcomed to the United States by artists linked to the BAM. Most significantly Harry Belafonte facilitated work opportunities for the South Africans and advised them on how to legalise their stay in the United States (1997, 19–28).

As depicted in the play, on her arrival, Letta briefly stayed in Miriam Makeba's apartment in New York, which was an unofficial meeting point for the displaced South Africans. As there was a steady stream of young exiles arriving from South Africa, Makeba organised gatherings which, as represented in the book, not only served a practical function of integrating them into American society; these occasions provided communion, where all participants could affirm their emotional and spiritual links to the land of their birth. Politically progressive government policy in New York recognised the need to create job opportunities for Black Americans and the city had a programme to promote the arts, thereby creating a favourable environment.[14] Therefore, the South Africans, some of whom had become stateless because their passports had lapsed, were not in danger of being deported. They were employed and received performance fees even while not having refugee documentation.

South African artists benefitted from a largely sympathetic Black community and officialdom that overtly (American Black artists) and covertly (officialdom in New York where the *King Kong* group lived and worked) welcomed them. However, it was still an ambiguous welcome in that they were kept in limbo by not acquiring automatic

14 For example, during the mayorship of Robert F. Wagner Jnr, (during the years 1954–1965), housing discrimination based on race was banned and a significant number of Black people were hired in city government. At this time, the Lincoln Centre for the Performing Arts was developed, which later hosted the plays of Maishe Maponya and other South African playwrights in the mid-1980s. For more information on Wagner, see: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-F-Wagner-mayor-of-New-York-City.

American citizenship. This meant that their privileges could be summarily revoked. In this way, the exiles felt both welcome and not welcome.

While they were placed in an unhomely situation, the South Africans were not dispirited by being stateless both in South Africa and the United States. It is worth asking how and why the South Africans successfully managed to mediate their ambiguous welcome to achieve solidarity with their American counterparts and to create works of lasting artistic value. Along with Mbulu's collaborations with Quincy Jones, other collaborations include Miriam Makeba and Harry Belafonte, in a long-playing album titled *An Evening with Belafonte/Makeba*, which won a Grammy award in 1966, and Hugh Masekela's collaboration with Herb Alpert, which achieved commercial success in 1978 with the album *Herb Alpert/Hugh Masekela*.

In the play there are several ways in which the influence of African humanism is represented. The play foregrounds how filial relations were important to the South Africans in exile. For example, the character Mambuli remarks to an Anglican reverend that she honours her tradition by giving her children an African upbringing. She says: "Uyazi MFUNDISI sikhulisa abantwana bethu ngesintu" (Maponya 1997, 6). The word *ngesintu* may be applied literally to refer to "African people" or to signal "Bantu characteristics," "culture," "Bantu language," or "Humankind" (Doke and Vilakazi 1953, 608). In the context of the play, applying the Zulu word is rich with connotative suggestion as it signifies the following characteristics and ideals to the reader: "human nature," "humanness," "good disposition," "good moral nature," and the "feelings" or the spirit of being human. The idea of a human being existing in an African collective is foregrounded throughout the play. Examples include the mention of "izulu" to emphasise how the contemporary world encompasses mundane social life that has spiritual and psychic links to the universe (Maponya 1997, 19) and "amadlozi" or the "ancestors" (Maponya 1997, 22) to emphasise the continuity between past and present-day cultures and social practice. These ideas permeate the play to represent how the quality of *seriti* is a means to explain that the individual is part of the traditions circulating in a society. We can see the play as making a point that the unity of the human being as a subject corresponds to the unity of Black people constituting a society. This means that the Black society has a self-defined cultural identity.

In talking about Black people opposing "white supremacy" in South Africa and the Black civil rights movement in the United States (Maponya 1997, 19), the play highlights the way in which both groups share a common history of resisting social and political marginalisation. It is in this way that the play also introduces the idea of solidarity—among the South Africans in exile, and between the South Africans and their American counterparts. This is also evident in the way the character of Malcolm X observes that "[t]here can be no white-black solidarity until there's first some black solidarity!" (Maponya 1997, 32). Therefore, solidarity was cemented by ancestral ties (since Americans were seen as descendants of the transatlantic slave trade, this meant that Black people have common ancestors) and a similar history of marginalisation.

Therefore, an understanding arose to promote a common agenda for "[o]ur brotherhood [which] is based on the fact that we are all black, brown, red and yellow" (32). The play also represents how characters sought "[t]he spirit of sisterhood" (Maponya 1997, 29) and "[u]nity without politics." To highlight one congruence between African humanist and African American approaches to literary texts I borrow Tyson's (2023, 344) observation that, as a theoretical farmwork, African American criticism "foregrounds race; African American cultural traditions; racism in all its forms; the intersection of racism, sexism and classism" as well as what she calls "cultural psychology," which in African humanism is seen as aligned to the exploration of spirituality.

Lastly, we can see a concentrated representation of the trajectory—from unhomeliness to Black solidarity—in the excerpt of the poem "Morning in Tunis" (Kgositsile 1990, 4 and 14):

1 There will be no celebration of life
2 Except where memory collected and collective
3 From then now and then guide us

4 Now even though
5 My children have never known peace
6 I would like the children of the world
7 To see with their ear
8 And sing the sunrise in Tunis

In line 1, by stating that "[t]here will be no celebration of life," the lyric subject represents exile as a form of *uku khala* or pain and emphasises this mournful trope in the declaration that human existence and humanity cannot be celebrated since exile brings forth violence to the soul. I read line 3 in conjunction with lines 1 and 2 and I incorporate Ari Sitas's comments in the introduction to Kgositsile's poetry collection titled *When the Clouds Clear* (1990). Furthermore, the word *khala* implies a spiritual wound that demands resolution. The lyric subject also implies that memory of the collective Black society provides a pathway (or "guide") to resolve the crisis of rootlessness (interpreting lines 2, 3, and 4). Finally, it is through reconciling common ground between "[m]y children" or South African exiles and "the children of the world" or Black society in the receiving country (Tunisia) that solidarity (or resolution/ peace) is achieved (interpreting lines 5, 6, and 8 in the stanzas of the poem).

Conclusion

Following Tyson (2023, 344), I posit that African humanism, like African American criticism, is both a subject matter and a theoretical framework. Both these theories are informative when analysing the writings of "a specific group of historically of oppressed people" (344) as the object of the study. This observation also reveals that solidarity was possible because South African and American artists shared similar histories of

oppression and this history is represented in their individual and collaborative work during the 1950s and 1960s.

When looking at African humanism as subject matter, we may consider the study of a body of literature written by South African Black artists without considering elements in their texts that specifically refer to Black people. As a theory, I recapitulate that African humanism foregrounds race in terms of racial identity or how a social grouping may identify itself in terms of a racial category with specific cultural traditions (for example by referring to themselves as Black people with a well-defined African culture). In defining the area of study, Mphahlele foregrounded race as tied to Africa as a geographical space and he saw race as a stable identity, and not a socially constructed phenomenon in society or in literature. He also remarked that African humanism had a capacity to encompass diversity. Although it is an unfinished work, *Letta* has hopefully provided a bridge with which to view the ambiguous nature of the exile experience by those that left South Africa between the late 1950s and early 1960s, and to show how they mediated the sense of being unhomed and to find solidarity with their American counterparts. As Mphahlele (2002, 323) remarked, literature "probes and captures … a people's collective consciousness—its myths, its yearnings, its failures and triumphs" to provide "a record of physical and psychological exile, [and] of homecomings."

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