

Train-congregants and Train-friends: Representations of Railway Culture and Everyday Forms of Resistance in Two South African Texts

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Introduction: Railways, Resistance, and Representation

The Political, like the purloined letter, is hidden in the everyday, exactly where it is most obvious: in the contradictions of lived experience, in the most banal and repetitive gestures of everyday life—the commute, the errand, the appointment. It is in the midst of the utterly ordinary, in the space where the dominant relations of production are tirelessly and relentlessly reproduced, that we must look for utopian and political relations to crystallize (Kaplan & Ross 1987:3).

... a way of using imposed systems constitutes the resistance to the historical law of a state of affairs and its dogmatic legitimations. A practice of the order constructed by others redistributes its space; it creates at least a certain play in that order, a space for maneuvers of unequal forces and for utopian points of reference (De Certeau 1984:18)

... the ordinary daily lives of people should be the direct focus of political interest because they constitute the *very content* of the struggle, for the struggle involves people not abstractions (Ndebele 1986:156).

‘Trains as tropes’ pervade South African literary production of the apartheid era as surely as railways formed part of the daily fabric of the lives of

millions of black South Africans¹. In this article, I propose to examine two brief texts—a short story by Miriam Tlali and a photo-essay by Santu Mofokeng—which represent black South Africans commuting by train between their homes in peri-urban townships or rural towns and their workplaces in urban areas set aside for whites. In Tlali's 'Fud-u-u-a!' (1985) and in Mofokeng's 'Train Churches' (1987), black railway commuters are represented as engaging in forms of implicit protest against the dehumanising environment and processes in which they are embedded. Both texts encode one of the most 'banal and repetitive gestures' of everyday black South African urban life: that of the railway commute to and from the white areas. Following Kaplan and Ross, I attempt to show how in these texts it is in 'the midst of the utterly ordinary' that relations of everyday resistance crystallize.

In the context of South African literary studies, evocation of 'the ordinary' cannot but bring to mind Njabulo Ndebele's critique of anti-apartheid protest writing and of the spectacular ethos of protest cultural production in South Africa more broadly (Ndebele 1984; 1986; 1989; 1990). Paralleling, albeit independently and from a South African perspective, arguments on the category of 'the everyday' by French cultural theorists Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre, Ndebele's 'rediscovery of the ordinary' helps bring into focus whole areas of social life and cultural production which often inhabit a blurred and marginal space in the analytical and political purview of Left critics.

Both Njabulo Ndebele and Michel de Certeau produced their essays on 'the everyday/the ordinary' in the 1980s, a decade which saw a trans-disciplinary and trans-national rethinking of resistance. Broadly, critiques of orthodox understandings of resistance have tended to argue that the category should be broadened to include not just struggles involving the state, formal organisations, open protest and national issues, but also what James C. Scott (1985) terms 'everyday forms' of resistance.

Referring to the resistance to coercion of black miners in what was then Southern Rhodesia, historian Charles Van Onselen (1976:239) notes

¹ I borrow the phrase 'trains as tropes' from Michael Wade, whose article 'Trains as Tropes: The Role of the Railway in Some South African Texts', examines a variety of inscriptions of the railway in South African literature by both white and black writers. In black writing, such inscriptions are found in texts which collectively span the apartheid years, from the 1950s *Drum* stories of Can Themba, through the 1960s protest writing of James Matthews, to the Black Consciousness and post-protest stories of writers such as Mtutuzeli Matshoba and Bheki Maseko in the 1970s and 1980s respectively. That the leading black cultural journal to emerge after the 1976 Soweto uprising should be named *Staffrider* (after the young daredevil commuters who rode at an angle to the trains and to authority) suggests something of the power of the train as cultural symbol in urban black South African life.

that the miner's defiance was waged largely in 'the nooks and crannies of the day-to-day situation'. It is among just such 'nooks and crannies' that I locate encodings of everyday resistance. From the perspective of modes of social inquiry which confine their assessment of historical practices to the clear-cut operations of explicit domination and manifest resistance, I locate these encodings in unlikely places and among implausible candidates; viz. in representations of mostly middle-aged and female train-congregants and train-friends. As will become apparent, my analysis of the texts by Tlali and Mofokeng owes much to the work of historical anthropologist Jean Comaroff and of political scientist and ethnographer James C. Scott, as well as to the insights of Ndebele and De Certeau.

My overall aim in this article is to explain how the cultural texts that I examine represent forms of everyday resistance to the material and ideological dimensions of railway commuting as well as to aspects of the ideology of apartheid more broadly. An attendant objective is to show how the realm of 'the everyday' is contested terrain that does not yield pristine narratives of resistance which can be pitted against some putatively monolithic narrative of domination. While the texts which I analyse give evidence of resistance, they also reveal anxiety and contradiction, especially in the realm of gender. The ore of resistance can be mined from the seams of quotidian life, but like any mineral it is studded with impurities.

I

White Writing, Black Writing, and 'the Web of Steel'

A potent material component of the processes of colonisation, industrialisation, and urbanisation in Southern Africa, the railway has become, as Michael Wade (1994:76) notes, 'a powerful and multivalent symbol of the processes themselves'². Wade examines the various roles which the trope of the railway has played in literary inscriptions of the social processes spawned in South Africa by capitalism under colonial rule, segregation, and apartheid. After considering the ways in which the railway trope has been deployed to different ends in a selection of texts by white writers, Wade (1994:87) provides a useful summary of its uses in black writing:

The convention of black inscriptions regards trains as venues for violence, as social microcosms of the larger black situation heterogeneous, vulnerable,

² See *An Atlas of African Affairs* by Ieuan Griffiths and the same author's 'The Web of Steel' for concise, critical accounts of the genesis, development, and political economy of South(ern) Africa's railway system.

overcrowded, unprotected, transitional people, at the mercy of predators. In black inscriptions the train encapsulates the fragmentation of black experience in the firing-line of state capitalism, the alienation of urban black societies, the transfer of state violence to the black community via its own delinquents. In black inscriptions the train is a symbol of the devastation of black experience under apartheid; it is a symbol of the *destructiveness* of white industrial power.

Wade's temporal purview is almost the entire twentieth century: his analysis encompasses the period between the publication of Perceval Gibbon's novel, *Margaret Harding*, in 1911, and that of Bheki Maseko's short story, 'The Prophets', in 1989. The scope of this article is narrower and its emphasis is different. Unlike Wade, I focus on two texts from the 1980s in which the train is not simply a figure of 'the destructiveness of white industrial power' (although the menace of that destructiveness hovers around them both). Rather, the train here functions as a polysemic site that assembles microcosmic communities which reveal the complex responses of blacks to conditions of systemic oppression.

Although the inventory of inscriptions which Wade catalogues does not exhaust the range of textual representations of trains by black writers, even a cursory survey of literary production from the 1950s through the 1970s attests to the overall validity of his argument. Two texts from the 1950s by the Sophiatown writer Can Themba, a short story entitled 'The Dube Train' and a report called 'Terror in the Trains', narrate the callous depredations of tsotsis on innocent commuters. A couple of decades later, in the turbulent wake of the Soweto uprising, the vicious tsotsis of Themba's text reappear in Mbulelo Mzamane's 'Dube Train Revisited'. Another two stories from the late 1970s, Berung Setuke's docu-fictional 'Dumani' and Michael Siluma's 'The Naledi Train', also thematise the intimidation, robbery, and assault of commuters by disaffected and violent urban youth. Nevertheless, as I will argue momentarily, and as Wade himself acknowledges towards the end of his essay, such texts tell only part of the story of black inscriptions of railway cultures.

Like the Barolong boo Ratshidi people of the South Africa-Botswana border whom anthropologist Jean Comaroff (1985:1) writes about in *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance*, the characters in the texts which I examine in this paper are represented as:

... human beings who, in their everyday production of goods and meanings, acquiesce yet protest, reproduce yet seek to transform their predicament

What is 'the predicament' in which the characters in the short story and the commuters captured in the photo-essay are mired? Beyond the personal details of their individual lives, they are all reluctant conscripts in a labour-

force whose overarching function is to reproduce the socio-economic order of South African capitalism and apartheid. In what follows, I will first sketch out the function of urban rail transport in the political economy of the South African nation-state under apartheid and then proceed to interpret the texts by Tlali and Mofokeng as cultural artefacts which encode informal attempts to undercut this economy's rationale and effects, thereby exposing the limits of apartheid oppression³.

II

'The Hours to Hell and Back': Urban Rail Travel Under Apartheid

As it pulls away some hang on outside.
Inside, people are like sardines
The only air is carbon dioxide
Most are standing, and there is no empty seat for any
pregnant women.

While the train moves, voices shout 'Foduwa'.
Angels mourn when no human judge feels mercy.
These are the hours to hell and back,
When the black transport is on the move.

(Molusi 1981:53)

Under apartheid, all the major urban areas depended on the labour of blacks who lived in townships situated on the periphery of the cities and in the so-called homelands⁴. In the mornings, black workers would flock to their

³ Legal de-segregation of trains and railway facilities began tentatively in the Witwatersrand in 1979, took another hesitant step in 1985, was pursued in the Cape Peninsula in 1988 and disappeared de facto everywhere in June of that same year. De jure racial separation, exclusion, and discrimination in trains, taxis, and buses were abolished by government decree in October 1990 with the repeal of the Separate Amenities Act of 1953 (Pirie 1992:180).

⁴ Despite the strenuous efforts by apartheid planners to keep the designated white areas of South African cities 'white by night', blacks continued to live there and to create informal social networks which secured their presence. As sociologist Eleanor Preston-Whyte noted (1982:164), 'Blacks not only work, but also live, in many of the white suburbs of South African cities. They constitute a largely ignored category of "non-people" whose presence is tolerated because of the services they offer to whites but whose existence is socially ignored both in planning and in the day-to-day community of these "white areas". Blacks who work and live within "white" cities have, however, created a distinct sub-culture which serves and expresses those particular needs which stem from the geography of residential separation'.

workplaces in the white zones by overcrowded bus, taxi, and train. In the evenings, having expended their labour in areas where they were considered to be, in apartheid bureaucratese, mere 'temporary sojourners', workers would be required to return to their homes away from the white areas⁵. More often than not, this daily commuting was exhausting, nerve-wracking, and dangerous (Kiernan 1977). Amenities for blacks at railway stations were segregated and usually sub-standard. Trains ran on infrequent and unpredictable schedules, were impossibly overcrowded and unsafe, and were plagued by criminal violence⁶. The daily grind of segregated travel formed an integral part of the everyday life of city-dwelling Africans and constantly reminded them of the inequity under which they lived and laboured:

For decades the state-operated trains and the subsidized buses were a daily reminder to Black people of their exclusion from white residential areas. They also measured the pulse of industrial life, reminding people of their inferior utilitarian status in urban South Africa. Public transport symbolized oppression and subservience (Pirie 1992:177).

Yet as Pirie (1992:172) further notes, black commuters were never merely a passive human cargo:

... even the social engineers could not surmount the fact that Black commuters were not just units of unconscious freight. To its users, public transport is more than just uniform and passive mobility.

Pirie's description of black commuters as purposive actors in the everyday drama of social reproduction underpins the argument of this article. Elaborate

⁵ Geographer J.M. Pirie (1992:172) describes railway commuting as a planned effect of the country's system of racial capitalism: 'Apartheid required that urbanization was accompanied by the enforced segregation of people of different race. This necessitated a gigantic programme of spatial engineering in terms of which Blacks were allocated housing on the fringes of urban areas or in rural bantustans. In both instances regular, efficient and inexpensive public transport was imperative to ensure that the massive displacement of the workforce did not interrupt the smooth working of the economy. The extensive construction of commuter railways and roads and the subsidization of commuter fares were essential ingredients of this deliberately distorted form of urbanization'

⁶ A chapter in Ernest Cole's famous *House of Bondage* entitled 'Nightmare Rides' visually and verbally captures the gruelling conditions of what Can Themba referred to as the 'congested trains, filled with sour-smelling humanity'. Bereng Setuke's 'Dumani' catalogues in grim and extensive detail the various ravages which commuters suffered at the hands of assorted criminals. The cover and centre-fold section of *Staffrider 41* feature photographs by Paul Weinberg and Mxolisi Moyo of everyday scenes at urban railway stations. (The centre-fold is entitled 'Stations and Staffriders' and contains a poem which figures the train as a swallower of lives.)

ting upon Michel de Certeau's (1984:18) ideas about 'the stubborn, resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations', the texts which I examine below reveal some of the ways in which

... within a grid of socio-economic constraints, [everyday] pursuits unfailingly establish relational tactics (a struggle for life), artistic creations (an aesthetic), and autonomous activities (an ethic) (De Certeau:ix).

Under the 'grid of socio-economic constraints' constituted by apartheid capitalism, the everyday pursuit of commuting to and from sites of alienated and racialised labour did indeed engender 'relational tactics' grounded in autonomous cultural expression⁷. One of the most visible of these everyday cultural forms was the practice of worshipping on trains, represented in the photo-essay to which I now turn.

III

Photographing Resistance to the Menace and Alienation of Apartheid Transport: Santu Mofokeng's 'Train Churches'

I think that particularly in a country like South Africa where for centuries and particularly in the last four decades or so there has been an overt attempt to remove people's identities or to make them something other than what they are ... there is a huge potential there for using photography in a way that could actually, in some small measure, get people back to their identity, get people back their control of identity' (Nunn 1993:208)

To extend leftist discourses about political economy and the state to a discourse about capitalist civilization is to accent a sphere rarely scrutinized by Marxist thinkers: *the sphere of culture and everyday life*. And any serious scrutiny of this sphere sooner or later must come to terms with religious ways of life and religious ways of struggle (West 1984:9).

Cedric Nunn's call for a photography that would help restore a people's identity and Cornel West's insistence on the need for progressive thinkers to engage the sphere of religious ways of life and struggle are simultaneously

⁷ Pirie (1992:176f) notes that in the 1980s the trains became venues for organised political resistance of various kinds. I do not know whether there are literary representations of 'train committees' and 'train rallies' but such representations would in any case fall outside the scope of this paper which focuses resolutely on unorganised and improvised modes of resistance.

concretised in a photo-essay entitled 'Train Churches', by the documentary photographer Santu Mofokeng. Published in a 1987 special issue of the North American journal *Triquarterly* devoted to new writing, photography, and art from South Africa, 'Train Churches' photographically documents an instantiation of De Certeau's (1984:18) notion of how

a practice of the order constructed by others redistributes its space, it creates at least a certain play in that order, a space for manoeuvres of unequal forces and for utopian points of reference

The order here is that of the commuter trains transporting African workers in the service of the apartheid economy; the practice is that of improvised prayer meetings through which some commuters attempt to overcome the menace and alienation of apartheid transport.

In this section I examine 'Train Churches' as a text which frames and valorises certain everyday practices of resistance grounded in religious ritual. Since I am dealing here with a textual representation that *mediates* everyday life and not with a transparent window onto a quotidian South African reality, I devote some attention to the questions raised by the complexity of the photo-essay form. First, however, I offer a brief overview of the trajectory of oppositional South African documentary photography and of Mofokeng's relationship to it.

In his 1987 reflection on documentary photography's role in the struggle against apartheid, photographer Paul Weinberg claims that South African practitioners of the genre can be divided into two generations: the pre-1980s generation, characterised by the figure of the dogged and solitary photojournalist (best exemplified, perhaps, by Ernest Cole)⁸, and the generation which came of photographic and political age in the 1980s. While there is some continuity between the two, the work of the 1980s generation is in Weinberg's view largely the product of collective endeavour. Mofokeng belongs to the 1980s generation, one which in a later piece Weinberg dubs the 'Taking Sides Generation'. This generation created a number of photography collectives, one of the most active of which was Afrapix, formed in 1982.

The work of Afrapix was motivated by two broad objectives: on the one hand, to function as an agency and as a picture library; on the other, to foster the practice of documentary photography in alliance with the mass anti-apartheid organisations which emerged in the early 1980s. Afrapix

⁸ Cole's *House of Bondage* and Peter Magubane's *Magubane's South Africa* are classic examples of the kind of work produced by the pre-1980s generation (The temporal demarcations should not be regarded too rigidly; Magubane has continued to produce excellent work into the 1990s)

photographers exhibited and published their work collectively, abroad as well as in South Africa. Most of this work attempted to record the ongoing struggle against apartheid from an openly partisan perspective. For instance, 'On the Front Line: A Portrait of Civil War', another photo-essay published in *Triquarterly*, consists of images produced by four Afrapix photographers which document scenes of repression and defiance from the State of Emergency of the mid-1980s⁹.

Considered seditious by the State, the work of oppositional photographers was often banned, confiscated, and destroyed throughout the apartheid years. A plethora of legal restrictions severely curtailed the efforts of photographers to document social unrest and opposition to the State. In addition, photographers themselves were regularly harassed, banned, and imprisoned.

Significantly, the clampdown on press freedom during the mid-1980s State of Emergency led photographers to turn their attention to what Weinberg (1989:69) describes as 'more in-depth community photography and more personal searches in the community of the photographer'. In so doing, Afrapix photographers like Mofokeng shifted their gaze from the spectacle of head-on struggle to less dramatic scenes, away from the conflict-ridden streets of the townships. Writing in 1991, two years after the lifting of the State of Emergency and a year after Mandela's release, Weinberg (1991:97) argued that documentary photographers should create a photographic practice that could go beyond the limitations of protest photography:

The momentum we flowed with has gone. We now have to create our own. Our photography is faced with that challenge. We need to go beyond politics or maybe

⁹ Much of the work of young oppositional photographers was showcased in annual collective exhibitions held between 1982 and 1987 under the auspices of *Staffrider*. In a special issue of the journal devoted to the first exhibition, the thinking underpinning the practice of these photographers was made explicit: "'The camera doesn't lie". This is a myth about photography in South Africa in the Eighties that we will not swallow. In our country the camera lies all the time—on our TV screens, in our newspapers and on our billboards that proliferate our townships. Photography can't be divorced from the political, social and the economic issues that surround us daily. As photographers we are inextricably caught up in those processes—we are not objective instruments but play a part in the way we choose to make those statements [The photographers in this collection] show a South Africa in conflict, in suffering, in happiness, and in resistance. They examine the present and beckon the viewer to an alternative future. Social Documentary Photography is not, in our view, neutral. In South Africa the neutral option does not exist—you stand with the oppressors or against them. The question we pose is how do photographers hit back with their cameras?' (in Weinberg 1989:64).

The ethos of protest photography expressed in the *Staffrider* editorial was to remain dominant for the better part of the 1980s.

redefine what politics is. Maybe we should start by recognizing that it is people out there that make this struggle. It is people that make those statistics. It is time for photography to shift its focus. People make the struggle and it is not simply the politicians, the press conferences and the talking heads that are important. 'News and politics' both so critical in our highly politicised country have made the rendition of imagery superficial and limited.

This dissatisfaction with 'superficial and limited' imagery was also expressed by another member of the Afrapix collective, Cedric Nunn. In an interview in which he argues for empowering people to become active, critical consumers of images from the multifarious social text of late-capitalist South Africa, Nunn (1993:207) charts the transformation in his aesthetic and political concerns:

Certainly I became a photographer and many people in Afrapix became photographers, because we wanted to make some sort of political intervention. A lot of us have moved, in that process we have come closer to seeing photography as art-form, as a creative art-form ... And that removes it from the arena of hard-core politics, if you want, but I don't think that that diminishes it in any way because it then takes on a creativity of its own.

As the quotations by Weinberg and Nunn make clear, in photography (as indeed in literature), a tactical shift was underway in the late 1980s from the overtly political to realms often dismissed as apolitical (and therefore not 'relevant') by leftist critics¹⁰. I want to argue that in the terms of Njabulo Ndebele's critique of protest writing, the shift entailed focusing on the arena of 'the ordinary' and on the 'infinite number of specific social details' of people's lives (Ndebele 1989:69) of which the ordinary was composed.

Mofokeng's work shows an abiding concern for depicting 'ordinary black South Africans going about the day-to-day business of living' (Mofokeng in Holst Petersen & Rutherford 1992:73). In 'Train Churches', published in the same year as Nunn's interview, Mofokeng records the activities of railway commuters taking part in prayer meetings, a common feature of urban train travel since the early 1970s¹¹.

¹⁰ One is reminded here of Antonio Gramsci's (1988:397) remarks on the new literature which might emerge from an intellectual and moral renewal of European culture in the crisis-ridden 1930s: 'The premise of the new literature cannot but be historical, political, and popular. It must aim at elaborating that which already is, whether polemically or in some other way does not matter. What does matter, though, is that it sink its roots into the humus of popular culture as it is, with its tastes and tendencies and with its moral and intellectual world, even if it is backward and conventional'.

¹¹ In addition to documenting religious railway culture, Mofokeng has recorded the lives of African labour tenants in the rural Transvaal (1991), daily life in Soweto (1990), and scenes from the small Western Transvaal mining-town of Phokeng (Bozzoli 1991:29, 199ff, 214ff).

Mofokeng's introductory text, ten photographs, and three captions capture moments in the rituals of the urban railway expressive culture of the 'train churches'. The essay's introduction deftly summarises the characteristics and significance of this assemblage of performative railway practices, keyed on religious faith:

Early-morning, late-afternoon and evening commuters preach the gospel in trains en route to and from work.

The train ride is no longer a means to an end, but an end in itself as people from different townships congregate in coaches—two to three per train—to sing to the accompaniment of improvised drums (banging the sides of the train) and bells

Foot stomping and gyrating—a packed train is turned into a church

This is a daily ritual (Mofokeng 1987:352).

Comaroff notes that ritual is a key element of the everyday forms of protest of marginalised peoples¹². Such forms of protest are often imbricated in what Cornel West calls 'religious ways of life' and 'religious ways of struggle' in the 'cultural life-worlds of the oppressed'. In 'Train Churches', Mofokeng's camera has recorded a few moments of the everyday expressive religious culture of the oppressed.

Upon a first viewing, Mofokeng's photographs jar with an outsider's mental archive of images of South Africa in the 1980s. Absent from these photographs are the toyi-toying comrades, the burly, sjambok-wielding policemen, the billowing clouds of rubber-tyre smoke, and the ominous Casspirs which long dominated photographic imagery of that decade produced for international consumption. Instead, in 'Train Churches' we encounter images of mostly middle-aged African women dressed in everyday workclothes who have been photographed while performing various practices such as singing, clapping, healing, praying, preaching and dancing. Surrounded by other commuters who are photographed looking on bemused, reading, or dozing, the framing of the worshippers in these train churches suggests that they are transported by religious fervour.

If the ethnographic arguments of anthropologists like Jean Comaroff are accurate, such fervour is the expression of an assemblage of practices which enable worshippers to mediate the profoundly alienating character of urban railway travel, itself a manifestation of a larger order of alienation, that

¹² Historians and anthropologists have shown how ritual practices of singing, dancing, and spirit-mediumship have played a hidden but significant role in the struggle for African liberation. See, for instance, the work of Terence Ranger on the Beni Ngoma of East Africa, ritual dances which simultaneously mimicked and mocked colonial military styles, Leroy Vail and Landeg White's analyses of living oral traditions of protest song across Southern Africa, and David Lan's treatise on the role of Shona spirit mediums in the Zimbabwean struggle for independence.

of industrial capitalism in its South African form. In addition to describing what the photographs reveal of that mediation, I want to consider the work they do as images assembled in a photo-essay. Before assessing the character of Mofokeng's photographs as representations, however, I want to consider briefly the nature of the practices which they represent.

In his 1972 study of Zionist rituals on commuter trains transporting Black workers between the township of Kwamashu and white-dominated Durban, ethnographer J.P. Kiernan (1977:215) noted that while the people of the township accepted the train as part of everyday living, it was a constant reminder of their economically and politically dependent status. Further, in view of the sometimes disastrous accidents which took place on the African routes in the major urban areas and of the rampant violent crime on board the trains and at the stations, the train not surprisingly represented menace (Kiernan 1977:216). Kiernan shows how some commuters chose to contest their subordinate status and the menace of the trains through the enactment of religious rituals practised by Zionists (not all the subjects of his study were in fact Zionists).

While Mofokeng's essay does not specify what denominations the commuting worshippers belong to, their singing, improvised drumming, foot stomping and dancing suggests that they are adherents of the various charismatic sects of either the Independent or the Zionist churches of Southern Africa. Jean Comaroff (1985:167) explains that the dynamic system of religious signs and practices of the Zionist sects is centred on 'the ritualized attempt to reform the body and the location of the person in the world'. Reforming the body and re-centring the person are symbolic responses to the sense of alienation and of loss of cultural identity generated by capitalist socio-economic structures in a racially segregated order. Just as the body is at the centre of Zionist ritual and belief, bodies (and especially faces) occupy most of the photographic space of Mofokeng's frames.

In the remaining paragraphs of this section, I attempt a close reading of the photo-essay. I hope to show that in an essay consisting of only a one-paragraph introduction, ten photographs, and two captions, Mofokeng has managed to convey a sense of the resilience of African workers condemned to undertaking the same dreary, dangerous journey day after day. Commencing with three ambivalent pictures of solitary worshippers surrounded by indifferent commuters, and proceeding with a series of five portraits of worshippers in varying states of transcendence, the essay concludes with two collective portraits of exultant commuters continuing their performative practices on the platforms of the railway station.

Before commenting on the photographs individually, I want to undertake a brief reflection on the relationship between myself as viewer/critic and Mofokeng's essay. John Berger (1982:89) observes that when we find a

photograph meaningful, 'we are lending it a past and a future'. Despite the verbal contextualisation of the photographs through the medium of a prefatory paragraph and two captions, providing 'Train Churches' with 'a past and a future', is not an altogether straightforward proposition.

While 'Train Churches' is not a 'pure' photo-essay, most of the photographs in it lack the most minimal textual features that conventionally accompany a photo-essay: captions, legends, dates, names, and locations.¹³ Much about the photographs remains 'unreadable'. We are not told, for instance, why Mofokeng chose to document this particular aspect of quotidian South African urban life. This alone generates questions which the photographs cannot answer. What, for example, is the relationship between the photographer and his subjects? What relationships do his subjects have among one another? Were the photographs taken on different occasions among different groups of congregants? If so, why? What practices are the congregants engaged in precisely?

More intimate details about the photographs are also unavailable to us. What are the names of the people in the photographs? What do they think about their being photographed? The unavailability of answers to these and other questions reinforces the ambiguity inherent in the photographs. In what follows I intend to supplement the weak intentionality of the individual photographs with a narrative pieced together from the clues given to us both by the essay's verbal components and by the arrangement of its visual information. This narrative is perforce fragmentary and much about the photographs remains ineffable. But if John Berger (1982:289) is right in arguing that photographs placed sequentially are restored to a context of interpretable experience, then the ambiguity of 'Train Churches' yields polysemic meaning and not a frozen iconicity.

'Train Churches' opens with a half-body shot of a woman singing, clapping, and swaying her shoulders in the midst of a crowded train carriage. Although the woman's face is the photograph's focus, she is not gazing straight ahead but is looking instead in the direction of somebody in front of her and to her right who appears as a blurred arm in the bottom left part of the frame. The woman's face is the only one we see clearly in this photograph. We can only see partial profiles of the two figures behind her and of the seated woman in the bottom right hand corner. There is an odd tension in the photograph between the fast movement which the woman's blurred hands and body posture convey and the stillness and manifest uninterest of the figures behind her. That tension is further enhanced by the distribution of the light and dark tones. The light streaming in through the window in the

¹³ In writing about the form of Mofokeng's text, I have found W.J.T. Mitchell's work on the photographic essay useful (Mitchell:281-328)

right-hand third of the frame is bright and diffuse, evoking newness and illumination. That sense is offset, however, by the predominantly dark tone of the left third of the picture. The overall impression conveyed by the photograph is one of disconnection *and* engagement. Apparently disconnected from the commuters behind her, the woman sings on regardless, her countenance only slightly less impassive than that of the standing figure whose profile we see in the left third of the picture. The strange sense of impassivity conveyed by these two faces is however, slightly offset by the half-smile of the woman in the bottom right hand corner, who is sitting and reading a book (a Bible?) illuminated by the light from the window.

A similar dynamic is at work in the next photograph, a medium-long shot of a man crouching slightly as he apparently blows air outwards into the carriage with the help of his hands, also blurred. Like the woman in the previous photograph, this man is absorbed in his task and is not looking at the camera, thus lending the photograph an air of disengagement. The intensity of the man's expression stands in strange contrast to the impassivity of the three out of the four figures behind him who are contemplating his actions. The fourth person, the man reading the newspaper at the left of the photograph, is unconcerned with the display of religious expressivity taking place in front of him. Holding up the paper with his left hand, he hangs on to a strap with his right hand, his right arm held diagonally above his shoulder, leading the eye away from the scene to a point outside the frame. The air of disengagement is further enhanced by the way in which Mofokeng has captured the space in which the man is located, standing as he is between two poles by himself, flanked on either side by seated, dozing women clutching their carrier bags.

The mood changes somewhat in the third picture, another medium long shot of a singing worshipper, who like the worshippers in the previous two photographs is looking away from the photographer and is surrounded by considerable empty space. In this case, however, the worshipper has engaged the attention of those around him to a small degree, as is evident from the faint smiles of the two women behind the man, in the left half of the picture.

In the fourth photograph, much of which is dark, the partially lit faces and hands of three women and the light in the windows behind them prevent the dark areas from overwhelming the composition. Even though the women are clapping and singing (while seated), the photograph has a heavy and silent quality to it.

The fifth photograph, which captures women undertaking what appears to be a healing ceremony, generates greater tension than the previous ones. The tension results from the intensity with which the healer (captured from the side) holds the face of the woman in front of her, and the equal intensity with which a younger woman in the background, whose

illuminated face is the picture's focus, looks on to the scene of the healing with her mouth open as though she is both singing and registering alarm.

The sixth and seventh photographs capture the transported visages of an individual woman and an individual man respectively. Located at the very centre of the frame, the woman's illuminated face and torso convey a sense of sheer exaltation, a sense reinforced by the blackness which surrounds her and by the way in which her lit countenance contrasts with the faint silhouette which we can barely make out to the left of her. A similar effect is achieved in the next photograph, a captioned close-up of a priest with furrowed brow whose lit-up face is framed by two areas of black.

In the eighth photograph, we have close-ups of the serious countenances of two women, praying with their eyes closed while they hold their arms aloft. The last two pictures are of activities outside the train, and each captures more worshippers simultaneously than any of the previous photographs. In the first, a group of five women at the centre of the picture run in circles surrounded at a distance of a few feet by fellow commuters standing in a ring around them. The expressions on their faces are joyful, and that sense of joyfulness is enhanced by the wider sweep of the photograph, taking in as it does a much larger area than any of the previous eight pictures.

The very last photograph in the essay has a caption which reads 'Park Station, Johannesburg'. Singing continues onto platform before people go off in different directions to work'. In the left centre half of the picture, a small band of commuters walk along singing and clapping. Seven faces are visible and most of them are smiling. In the right-hand third of the photograph, other commuters standing at the open doorway of the train appear as blurred figures, while in the bottom right hand corner, the skirt, shoes, and socks of a woman walking along the platform are visible. The rest of her is not. There is a tension in the photograph generated by the contrast between the distinct joyfulness of the commuters on the left of the picture who have descended after surviving the journey intact and the blurred image of the commuters still inside the overcrowded and dangerous train.

Possibly taken on separate occasions, the photographs constitute a narrative whole which tells a story of alienation resisted. Writing about the 'opposition to history' manifested in a photograph by Andre Kertesz, John Berger (1982:103) notes that:

All photographs are possible contributions to history, and any photograph, under certain circumstances, can be used in order to break the monopoly which history has over time

These words are pertinent to my reading of 'Train Churches'. The train- and time-bound commuters in Mofokeng's photographs are represented in the process of breaking the monopoly which history has over

time and which the realm of necessity has over their day-to-day lives. As a whole, the essay contributes to this resistance by assembling the images in ways which invite recognition of the everyday drama they represent.

The overall effect of the essay is greater than the sum of its parts. This may be an intrinsic consequence of the montage-like properties of the photo-essay. John Berger (1982:289) argues that still photographs placed in a montage sequence are restored to a living context:

... not of course to the original temporal context from which they were taken—that is impossible—but to a context of experience. And there, *their ambiguity at last becomes true*. It allows what they show to be appropriated by reflection. The world they reveal, frozen, becomes tractable. The information they contain becomes permeated by feeling. Appearances become the language of a lived life

The context of experience to which the photographs in Mofokeng's essay are restored is that of the daily commuting experiences of millions of African workers. Celebratory and detached by turns, 'Train Churches' captures some of the complexity of an everyday experience in which ordinary workers enacted ritual practices that undercut the commodification to which they were subjected, even as they reproduced some of the features of the oppressive order. Appearances here do indeed become the language of lived lives, lives fraught with alienation, hope, and contradiction. Mofokeng's text is therefore in a sense more complex and compelling than either the deceitful, glossy images of life in South Africa circulated by apologists for apartheid or the imagery of unremittingly spectacular confrontation produced even by progressive photojournalists¹⁴.

For all its power, however, a de-contextualized reading of 'Train Churches' could serve to occlude the harsh realities which train-congregants often had to face. In 'Dumani', Bereng Setuke (1980:64) notes preachers and their impromptu congregations are often silenced by train-gangs singing obscene songs. In the story which I analyse in the next section, it is the congregation itself which participates in a 'silencing'.

¹⁴ I am thinking here of texts like T.C. Robertson's *South African Mosaic* (1978) on the one hand, and Peter Magubane's *Soweto: The Fruit of Fear* (1986), on the other. Published two years after the disturbances which rocked the nation's townships, *South African Mosaic* contains beautifully composed photographs of South Africa's landscapes, settlements, climatic features, and peoples. It is virtually impossible to glean any sense from the photographs and their captions that the contemporary reality which they documented was one of race and class war. Cumulatively, they have the effect of making South Africa seem both exotic and reassuring. Conversely, Magubane's text (which consists of photographs of the Soweto uprising) conveys an overall sense of helplessness and victimisation which is hard to square with the resilience of the struggle against apartheid both at the time when the photos were taken (1976) and at the time when they were published in book form (1986).

IV

'Finding Spaces to Stand Next to Each Other': Train Friends and Patriarchy in Miriam Tlali's 'Fudu-u-a!'

Social reproduction—what we are calling ... everyday life—has, of course, become in our own time the urgent issue on a host of political and cultural agendas, most significantly on that of feminism. For everyday life has always weighed heavily on the shoulders of women (Kaplan & Ross 1987:2f).

... if you look at our writings we treat things very superficially. We judge the results of oppression and exploitation. We neglect the creativity that has made the people able to survive extreme exploitation and oppression. People have survived extreme racism. It means our people have been creative about their lives (Serote 1981:32).

In my reading of it, 'Train Churches' represents some of the ways in which in the everyday experience of commuting blacks conscripted to serve the material needs of whites managed to contest their legal and economic condition as tokens of exchange in the production of goods, services, and capital. As I have noted, black commuters are represented as enacting this contestation through signifying practices which undercut, in small yet socially significant ways, the relentless processes of commodification to which they were subjected. I have shown how in 'Train Churches' these practices are figured as enactments of bodily presence.

In the last section of this chapter, I analyse a story, Miriam Tlali's 'Fud-u-u-a!', which deals with the contradictory location of women who must contend with multiple layerings of oppression. In the story, the train serves as a device for assembling a community of Black women who cope with the quotidian burden of commuting—with its attendant risks, dangers, and monotony—by constructing everyday practices based on female solidarity and friendship. Equally important, the train is also a device for calling into question simple appeals to racial solidarity which disacknowledge gender inequities.

As I have already suggested, under conditions of structural domination, bodily practices are crucial to the preservation of cultural identity. Writing about the limited forms of protest available to the Tshidi 'peasantariat' of the South African/Botswana border region, Jean Comaroff (1985:260) notes that while collective action of a conventionally 'political' nature is consistently denied them, 'the attempt to reassert control, to return to the world some form of coherence and tractability, continues'. This

attempt is enacted signally through bodily practices grounded in the religious rituals of the Zionist Church. Because Comaroff's (1985:260f) terse explanation of the social and symbolic purchase of these practices captures precisely the significance which I am ascribing to inscriptions of everyday resistance, I quote her at length:

The effort [to reassert control] is pursued through accessible implements that remain at the command of the 'powerless' and that speak to the contradictory location of the person in the world—the physical body and the practices which establish viable selfhood and a sense of relationship with a meaningful context. Hence, in the domains of everyday practice that escape direct control, a protest is mounted that acts upon the implications of neocolonial wage labor in its apartheid form and also upon the effects of commoditization on personal and social being. Such resistance, then, while it might not confront the concentrated forces of domination, defies the penetration of the hegemonic system into the structures of the 'natural' world

In my discussion of 'Train Churches', I spoke about how the 'accessible implements' available to the commuters were singing and dancing as elements of religious ritual. Most of the commuters who appear in Mofokeng's photographs are women, and it needs to be asked how the attempt to reassert control over the world is gendered. It is to this question that I now turn.

Comaroff's observation about 'the contradictory location of the person in the world' reminds us that domination never exists in a pristine, unmediated form. But an abiding awareness of 'the contradictory location of the person in the world' should also serve as a reminder that while human practices of resistance can never be fully incorporated by dominant orders, those practices can themselves be implicated in the forms of domination.

Noting the shift in South African writing (by whites as well as blacks) 'from the representation of mental conditions to a focus on physical realities or resistance, that is, a shift from mind to body in [South African] fiction', Stephen Clingman (1990:56) observes that black writing of the 1980s was concerned with 'elaborating primarily, a sense of social identity, of the regenerative, expansive social body'. In 'Fud-u-u-a!', a story of sexual abuse on the crowded trains, the positive valence given to the signifying practices of congregationists in 'Train Churches' is qualified and Clingman's 'regenerative, expansive social body' is seen to be fractured along lines of gender.

In her introduction to Tlali's (1989) *Soweto Stories*, the collection in which 'Fud-u-u-a!' appears, fellow writer Lauretta Ngcobo remarks on the small number of black South African women writers active in the 1980s. Ngcobo (1989:xv) points out that Tlali has been instrumental in addressing

the paucity of black women's contributions to South African literary culture and in articulating the structural reasons for this:

She dared not only to speak out against the South African system, but also against the dominance of male writing which has attended black literature from the beginning¹⁵

Ngcobo observes that in *Soweto Stories*, Tlali focuses on 'working conditions, marriage problems, poverty and poor housing, drinking problems, male fickleness and general degeneration'. As is the case with much black South African literature of the 1980s, the stories are chiefly concerned with life within the black urban communities, rather than with the Black-White racial dialectic. Centrally preoccupied with the lives of Black women, Tlali's stories connect sexism and male dominance with the structures of apartheid. As Ngcobo (1989:xixf) notes,

Through [Tlali's] roving eye we see beneath the skin of dominant men, we see how weak they really are; how decadent and incapacitated. Without any direct reference to the government and its apartheid system, she shows us how deeply the cancerous policies have eaten into our way of life.

Tlali's stories do not foreground either the battery of oppressive laws which constituted apartheid or the array of security and bureaucratic forces whose purpose was to defend and perpetuate those laws. Rather, there is a probing of the hegemonic injuries sustained by blacks living under extremely oppressive conditions, as well as an exploration of the ways in which they resist the penetration of the hegemonic system into their day-to-day lives.

'Fud-u-u-a!' is the story of three black women who are caught in the Friday crush of Johannesburg's rush hour, and who, after missing their preferred train, must wait for a notoriously unsafe train which they would rather not take because of its reputation for violence. In the narrative, there

¹⁵ In response to a comment by a male writer who blithely and condescendingly remarks that 'if you want to write, you will create the time, whether you have a child on your back or whether you are pregnant', Ngcobo (1986:203f) retorts: 'In Africa it is simplistic to say, "Just stand up and write", because though the women might want to write, they are not free to express the difficulties they come across in their marriages. And no woman will stand up in public and say, "I have been trying to write, but my husband won't allow it". So she says "I have been too busy". Those are the problems. When I make an appeal to the men in this gathering to let us write, to present our views differently, it is against the background of an unwilling male world'.

are several invocations of specifically female solidarity¹⁶. The first expression of solidarity, however, crosses the gender divide. As one of the characters absent-mindedly walks onto oncoming traffic, a male pedestrian pulls her back on to the sidewalk. The narrator records the character's gratitude for the man's intervention:

If it had not been for the timely gesture of the man, Nkele would have darted right into the flow of cars which came in rushing impetuously down that street. She stopped abruptly and gasped thankfully, 'Danke Abuti!'. She sighed, looking up at the face of the person whose arm had steadied her and perhaps saved her from certain disaster. 'Our brothers are usually so protective towards us in town here', Nkele thought gratefully (Tlali 1989:28)

That brotherly protectiveness, however, is absent from the scenario which Nkele evokes when describing to her friends the abuse to which she, like many other female commuters, had been subjected while riding the train home. Recalling how the train was especially crowded on that day, Nkele remarks that she was forced into an upright position by the crush of many bodies:

¹⁶ In her study of the social and cultural adaptations made by black domestic servants working and living in an area set aside for whites, Eleanor Preston-Whyte (1982:180f) discusses the complex reasons why train-friendships were of immense importance to Black female commuters: 'The long hours which Mrs M. spends in commuting during the week are not, from a personal point of view, completely wasted. When discussing her personal relations she mentioned with enthusiasm meetings she had with other passengers on the trains. She has regular "train-friends" who meet each morning and, if possible, each evening at the station and sit together in the same coach. They chat, knit or sew while the journey is in progress and walk together part of the way home from the station. Train-friends get to know a good deal about each other and about their respective families and problems. They assist each other in preparing food for parties and celebrations, which always strain both the time and the pocket of domestic servants. When Mrs M. was preparing a visit to her rural home, her three train-friends each gave her a small gift of money to help her meet her expenses. Train-friends also provide something of a protection on the daily journey to and from Durban. The trains are not only crowded, but are filled with people unknown to travellers, some of whom may be pickpockets. Women who travel together regularly can trust each other and so relax. Company on the walk home through the dark township streets is an invaluable guard against attacks and muggings. Should a train-friend not appear on time at the station, her companions will keep her a seat, and if she misses one or two journeys, will investigate by visiting her home; if she is ill or in need, they may provide the spearhead of help and succour. In this we have yet another example of an informal association which provides companionship, potential help and security and one, furthermore, which has arisen from the otherwise negative aspect of long daily commuter trips between Black and white residential areas'.

On that 'Four-Six', no one dares sit down on the hard wooden benches. Everyone in the coaches has to stand, on the benches or on the floor. You did what everybody else was doing if you did not want to break your back or lose your limbs I jumped on to the bunk and was forced into that upright position by the many bodies around me (Tlali 1989:38f).

Nkele then goes on to describe how from somewhere in the impossibly overcrowded compartment, a woman whom she was unable to see began to lead some of her fellow commuters in a ritual of communal hymn-singing. After reconstructing the call-and-response of the train-church service, Nkele tells her friends that at that moment she really wished 'they would stop singing and praying'. The reason? Under the cover of the worshippers' 'deafening chorus', unnamed perpetrators were engaging in sexual abuse:

Those who could lift up their hands started clapping them—*hard*. I wanted the music to stop because, instead of helping, the very noise was being used as a 'shield'. I was trying to scream that someone was busy massaging my thighs and backside, trying to probe into my private parts and nobody was paying attention. It was embarrassing and awful! (Tlali 1989:41)

Nkele tells her friends that although her protest went unheard, she attempted to resist the anonymous handling:

That day, I thanked God for having given me big powerful thighs because all I did was cross them over one another and squeeze as hard as I could. I clenched my teeth and wished that I were *grinding* those fingers between my thighs (Tlali 1989:41).

Her resistance, however, was ultimately unavailing:

... with so much congestion, it was impossible to see who the culprits were. We suffocated and suffered in that terrible torture of it all, and there was nothing we could do (Tlali 1989:41).

Nkele notes that her sense of powerlessness was reinforced by the knowledge that the grievances of abused women would not be believed, taken seriously, or even heard. She recalls that until that day, she herself had disbelieved stories of sexual abuse on the trains:

By the time the train got to Park Station, we were too hurt, too shamefully abused to speak. Who could we speak to? Who would listen to us even if we tried to complain? Everyone would tell us that 'it is all too shameful to say anything about this'. I used to hear women *whisper* about this and never believed it. I used to hear them swearing and spitting (Tlali 1989:41).

Nkele then recalls that after vociferously expressing their anger, she and the other women who had been sexually handled sought to recover their dignity by reinforcing their sense of femininity:

On that day I remember hearing a number of powerless women cursing and shouting on the platform, adjusting the wigs on their heads and, like myself, trying their best to look lady-like and presentable (Tlali 1989:41).

The memory of this episode prompts Nkele into an implicit critique of the patriarchal papering over of the abuse of sexual power:

What is even more annoying is that no one wants to even *talk* about this whole 'nonsense', as they regard it. It is *not* nonsense because who suffers? We suffer. They just don't care. They treat us exactly like animals (Tlali 1989:42)

Significantly, however, Nkele's incipient critique of the sources of female abuse is truncated by the arrival of the train which she and her companions have been waiting for. The limited nature of Nkele's critique possibly belies a deeper anxiety at work in the text. In an incisive reading of this section of Tlali's story, Zoe Wicomb (1990:41) notes that the mode of narration through which Nkele's remarks are conveyed serves both to critique and to conceal the sources of sexual abuse of women:

There are no male characters, no actants who perpetrate the abuse The abuse takes place on the horribly crowded trains for which the politics of segregation are squarely blamed, but the floating deixis ['they'] ... points to female reluctance to identify black men. The ambiguous 'they' can refer both to men who control female discourse and to the authorities who create conditions in which abuse becomes possible—that is, 'they' may create extenuating circumstances for men. Concealment, then, becomes a trope for the woman writer who has to negotiate the conflicting loyalties of race and gender

If Wicomb's reading is accurate, it may help to account for the frequent invocations by the narrator of both the fact of, and the need for, female solidarity. When Nkele introduces a woman she has just met to the friend with whom she had a rendezvous at the train station, the narrator remarks:

The three laughed loudly. There were no formal introductions necessary. Women in distress just accept each other without much hesitation because they know that they *need* each other (Tlali 1989:33)

On a positive reading, such an expression of female solidarity may simply reflect the strength of the gendered bonds which working-class women must achieve to survive the ravages of alienated and alienating labour.

Cumulatively, however, the frequent invocation of dictums like the one I have just quoted seems to betray an unspoken anxiety in the narrative over one of the causes of female oppression.

As Wicomb notes, segregation under capitalism is one cause of black women's domination and is identified as such in the story. Another, more intimate, source of domination, that of black men, is not named directly, however. Instead, the narrative relies on the anonymous third person plural marker 'they' (Wicomb's 'floating deixis') to refer to the perpetrators of sexual abuse. Even the nameless third person plural, however, seems to generate too much potentially uncontrollable anxiety¹⁷. After Nkele's comment about the way 'they' treat women like animals, the narrative focus shifts to the arrival of the long-awaited train:

'Here's the 'O-Five'!' someone shouted loudly. Others whistled. Nkele, Ntombi and Shadi scrambled into position. It was now time for business. Serious 'muscle' business; the tooth and nail fight for survival. 'Fudua! fudua! fud-u-u-a!' several gave the word of command (Tlali 1989:42).

The train's arrival serves to interrupt not just the women's conversation on the platform, but the narrative's evocation of gender conflict as well. In the story, 'business' takes over, the grinding quotidian business of struggling to carve out a space in the crush of homeward-bound bodies on the apartheid trains.

But while the story passes over in silence the conflict which the women fleetingly whisper about, its very mention constitutes a victory of sorts for the characters, as women struggling to survive in a patriarchal order. The evocation of this conflict also amounts to a victory, however muted, for the text as an intervention in a climate in which women's access to social and political power has met with stiff resistance, even from progressive quarters¹⁸.

¹⁷ In reading the story this way, I am of course making the text speak more than it knows. I think, however, that the text's structural hesitations and deflections call out for a reading of what it may be leaving unsaid.

¹⁸ In a meditation on the contribution which women's poetry could make to a post-apartheid dispensation, Ingrid Fiske (1989:78) makes the following suggestive remarks about the importance of 'seizing speech': '... in a country that's reconstructing itself, with great labour, the opportunity to assert the importance of women's experience "to seize speech" is there. The word is especially disqualified in South Africa; how much more available then is it for reworking by women? To have as one's endeavour the definition of the female self is one thing, to be defining within the context of a fractured state and revolutionary pressure is quite another. For what revolution is worth fighting if it perpetuates myths which exclude half its comrades?'

This victory is encapsulated in the meanings of the story's title. On the first page, an asterisk refers us to an explanation of the word 'Fudua!': 'a chant sung by distressed commuters trying to get on to crowded trains'. Commuters have to turn their backs to train doors and wriggle their bottoms to make room for themselves 'as they chant 'F-u-d-u-a!''. The everyday practice signalled by the chanting of 'Fudua!' is analogous to the work which the story performs in creating a space, however constrained, for a woman's narrative of everyday resistance. As Wicomb (1990:41) puts it:

The chant has specific illocutionary force those inside are forced to shift, to re-occupy the space in order to accommodate more people, and the contextual meaning of the title quietly transfers to the story and whispers its plea

Recalling the first time she and her friend Ntombi (one of the other two women on the platform) had braved the commuter crowds, Nkele reveals the full lexical meaning of the story's title:

When the train came bouncing into that Naledi platform, I was surprised to see people turn their backs away from the doors ready to propel with their shoulder-blades and backsides. 'Fudua! ... fudua! ... fud-u-u-a!' (stir the pot! st-i-i-r the p-o-t!), the push-push yelling started as everyone, man, woman, and child alike, strained all the muscles in their bodies to get inside. I just allowed myself to be 'carried' along. I thought I would be flattened dead (Tlali 1989:38).

Like a commuter able to make a space for herself in a dangerously congested carriage but prevented by the crush from moving or turning, the narrative manages to register a muted protest against a stifling masculinist discourse but is unable to confront that discourse head on¹⁹. Nevertheless, in the wider extra-textual context of the lives of working-class black women in the 1980s, 'Fud-u-u-a!' manages to 'stir the pot' of official discourse 'in order that a new space can be created for the crushed and degraded female to articulate her plight' (Wicomb 1990:41).

¹⁹ In a response to a paper on feminism delivered by Buchi Emecheta at the Second African Writers' Conference at Stockholm, Tlali (1986:185) comments on the generalised hostility to feminist perspectives among Black South African men, and points out that Black male sexism is complicit with the ideological underpinnings of apartheid. 'In South Africa, the question of Western feminism, encroaching into the minds of the African woman is a very, very sensitive question, particularly for the African man. Anytime you ask him to do something, to go and fetch the child today, or something like that he says: "Look, you are already a feminist. You are a white woman and a feminist". It is thrown into your face in the same way in which Communist is thrown into the face of the blacks in South Africa. So the fear is a concrete thing, there is a definite fear of feminism in the African men, especially in South Africa'.

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These 'crushed and degraded' females are not at all represented as hapless victims of an unrelentingly oppressive situation. Rather, they are women who within desperately constrained circumstances manage to maintain a viable and resilient sense of selfhood. (Often in the story the women are smiling and laughing as they chat, and we should recall Nkele's attempt to grind the hand of the man abusing her.) However, as the story winds to a close upon the train's arrival, it seems as though men are once again going to displace women from the narrative, just as women were often displaced from the narratives of nation and of the national liberation struggle:

Some youthful men wasted no time. Even before the train stopped, they held tightly on to the sides of the open windows, and swung their bodies, legs first, into the coaches. As soon as they had secured sitting space, they 'reserved' places for their female companions who of course had no alternative but to join the 'fudua' routine at the door (Tlali 1989:42).

But in the very last sentences of the story the women reassert their presence and achieve thereby a kind of 'victory':

In another two to three minutes, the train had come to a complete standstill and the three women had succeeded somehow in battling their way in. They had at last found space to stand next to each other. It was an achievement and a victory which deserved to be celebrated. Alert and watchful as ever, they stood smiling into each other's faces. They sighed. They had 'won' ... The whistle went. The 'O-Five' rambled on and on noisily and 'indifferently' towards Naledi (Tlali 1989:42).

The qualified victory of the women in obtaining a space on the crowded and dangerous trains reflects the qualified victory of the story as a whole in 'stirring the pot'. But the very last sentence reminds us of the contingency of the women's victory; they are still forced to travel in unsafe trains which ramble on 'indifferently' towards their destinations.

Whereas in Mofokeng's photo-essay the community constructed around the expressive practices of religious railway rituals is represented as unproblematic, in 'Fud-u-u-a!' those expressive practices provide a shield for sexual abuse and force the community to unwittingly conceal the abuser. The story thus throws into question definitions of community based on unproblematized assumptions of racial solidarity. But the implicit critique of a male-centred version of community remains undeveloped. Both texts thus partake of the fluidity which characterises the dialectic between domination and resistance.

The two texts which I have analysed in this paper are in a sense little more than fragments of the jostling, vibrant picture of black South African

cultural production of the 1980s. Nonetheless, by undertaking contextualised symptomatic readings of them I hope to have shown the considerable extension of their social meaning. Further work on the hidden histories of resistance in cultural production of this period will furnish more comprehensive perspectives on the picture which this article has attempted to describe.

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* For their valuable critiques of various drafts of this article, I would like to thank the following people: Nandi Bhatia, Fran Buntman, Zjaleh Hajibashi, Barbara Harlow, Salah Hassan, Kathleen Kane, Jose Limon, Karen Steele and Bernth Lindfors.

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