The Politics of the 1920s Black Press: Charlotte Maxeke and Nontsizi Mgqwetho's Critique of Congress

Athambile Masola
University of Pretoria , South Africa
athambile.masola@up.ac.za

Abstract

One of the most contested aspects in South Africa's historiography has been women's involvement in the politics of resistance. The work of feminists in the 1970s and 1980s began to question the invisibility of women's protest and presence in South Africa's historiography. The pass protest of 1956 was seen as the dominant narrative of women's involvement in protests. Other forms of political involvement were erased, and women were only represented as having staged a protest march against the pass laws. However, more evidence has emerged, which challenges the forms of political involvement by women—and more importantly, more is being done to unearth the names of the women—whose works have been ignored. This article explores the writings by Charlotte Maxeke and Nontsizi Mgqwetho, as they appeared in the 1920s in *Umteteli waBantu.* Much has been written about Charlotte Maxeke as a formidable leader in the early twentieth century, who founded the Bantu Women's League, after returning from Wilberforce University as the first black woman to get a degree. Maxeke's hypervisibility is contrasted with Nontsizi Mgqwetho's obscurity. Both these women wrote about the politics of their times, directing much criticism at the South African Native National Congress, which was founded in 1912, which excluded women from its membership at its inception. This article argues that their writings challenge the notion of black women as silent figures, who were not involved in the politics of the early twentieth century.

Keywords: black women's historiography; black archive; public sphere

Introduction

In his book, *The Founders,* Andre Odendaal traces the history of the African National Congress (ANC), which was founded as the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) in 1912. He dedicates a chapter to the role of women during the rise of African

nationalism in the early twentieth century. The chapter, "Women in the struggle", begins with a statement, which explains the invisibility of women in the nationalist movement:

> Women have generally been absent from South African narratives of nationalism and the nascent struggles for democracy before 1912. It has been accepted that those who started 'the Struggle' and the ANC were men, the 'founding fathers' to use the language of patriarchy, and that women's involvement in politics postdates 1912. (Odendaal 2016, 213)

This sentiment raises questions in respect of the narrative of the kind of political work done by women, especially black women during the late nineteenth century, and the early twentieth century. It also raises questions about the invisibility of women, where some argue that this is in fact, a deliberate erasure of women's political work—a consequence of capitalist patriarchy, which influenced political life in the nineteenth and twentieth century (Walker, 1982). The very idea of politically-involved women is premised on a particular kind of publicness—which often privileges the male body, because "in patriarchal societies the domestic was the place of women, while the public realm of culture, politics and the economy was seen as the sphere of men" (Blunt and Rose 1995, 2). My aim in this article is to make women's work visible because, as Bennet argues, "to understand the intersecting vectors of racism and misogyny under current capitalist interests, access to knowledges of women's experiences in the past is crucial" (Bennet 2000, 4).

Black Women and Political History

Black women have been written about in relation to family life, marriage, conversion to Christianity, pass protests and social clubs—as seen in the work of Megan Healy-Clancy, Natasha Erlank, Nomboniso Gasa, Deborah Gaitskell, Jacklyn Cock, Cheryll Walker, Dawne Curry and Julia Wells—amongst many prominent scholars, who have written about black women's historiography in South Africa. These narratives have been useful in answering the question "where are the woman?" (Chadya 2003), which has been posed in order to locate black women in South Africa's historiography. Ginwala's paper on the ANC and women is also relevant here, as she notes that "the absence of women from political institutions does not necessarily lead to their absence in the political arena." (Ginwala 1990, 78).

This article examines the letter that Maxeke wrote for the newspaper, *Umteteli wa Bantu,* on 12 June 1920, alongside Nontsizi Mgqwetho's poems, published in the 1920s, with a particular focus on *Uqekeko lwe Congress* ("The Split of Congress"), and *Imbongikazi no "Abantu-Batho* ("The Women Poet and *Abantu-Batho*"). Incidentally, Maxeke makes references to Mgqwetho in the letter mentioned above, and Mgqwetho mentions Maxeke in her poetry alongside, praising Maxeke's husband, who was editor of *Umteteli wa Bantu* and a clergyman (Opland 2012). This article also aims to speak

to the chapter, "*Abantu-Batho* and the Xhosa poets", written by Opland in Limb's book *The People's Paper: A Centenary History and Anthology of* Abantu-Batho. Opland notes Maxeke's writing in *Umteteli wa Bantu,* which references Mgqwetho. Opland does not pay much attention to Maxeke's piece in so far as it references Mgqwetho. This is a lost opportunity because Maxeke's letter raises many questions, which will be elaborated upon in the close reading of the work of both women.

Black Press and the Politics of the Archive

Understanding the importance of the black press during the nineteenth and twentieth century is crucial for this article. A. C. Jordan's work points to the development of newspapers by looking at the history of the printing press amongst missionaries in the 1800s. He writes "The dawn of literacy is to be associated first and foremost with the Glasgow Missionary Society" (Jordan 1973, 37). He continues to make a list of the periodicals, which began to appear, such as *Ikwezi* ("The Morning Star"), *Indaba* ("The News") and *Isigidimi-sama-Xhosa* ("The Xhosa Messenger"), which were publications used for reading and publishing ideas written by the early converts as well as the missionaries (Jordan 1973). Jordan's work illustrates clearly how the black press emerged directly out of the need for black people to assert themselves by writing content which was not censored and controlled by the missionary authorities.

By the early 1900s, an emerging black press was developing. Opland extends Jordan's work by looking at how newspapers were in fact, directly linked to the establishment of isiXhosa literature, as the early writers not only contributed news to the early newspapers, but prose and poetry as well. Opland has since reproduced the literature from these newspapers in a collection of volumes, which includes the writing by William Gqoba, S. E. K. Mqhayi, Isaac Wauchope, and Nontsizi Mgqwetho. These early newspapers—edited and sometimes owned by black people—were in conversation with each other. *Abantu-Batho* became an "alternative to white rule in liberalism, African nationalism, socialism and Garveyism, and so helping ignite new African identities and dreams for the future" (Limb 2012, 13).

In his analysis of *The Bantu World,* Switzer writes "Cultural texts are necessarily ambiguous sites in the struggle to confer power over lived experiences… A newspaper, for example, may provide a mirror image of a ruling culture, but it will also frame alternative discourses" (Switzer 1988, 351). Switzer points to three important issues: firstly, newspapers can be seen as cultural texts, which are ambiguous in their nature, because they raise questions about the lived experiences of writers in their times. Secondly, Switzer raises the question about the ruling culture, which determined the content of the newspapers and the writers selected. Finally, Switzer raises questions about an "alternative discourse", which these newspapers created, in light of the repressive state in South Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I am also

interested in the newspaper as a cultural text, which raises questions about the politics of archives; where archives can be understood to mean “traces of the past collected either intentionally or haphazardly as evidence” (Burton 2005, 3)—which is inherently a political process.

Gasa comments on the importance of the archive, and it is worth quoting her at length:

> Sometimes significance lies not in the absence/presence, silence/speech, but in the actual ways in which we read the historical documents, listen to the meta-narratives and pay attention to the details of history, including those which do not fit snugly into those long used, tried and apparently tested boxes that are our analytical tools. Most importantly, the question is how we read, reconstruct the archives and the texts, listen to the narratives and develop the analytical tools and framework we find of greatest analytical power. (Gasa 2007, 132)

This excerpt cautions against meta-narratives, not only about women’s lives, but also about history itself. By looking at particularities within the archives, such as newspapers, it is possible to see that the binaries about ‘‘absence/presence, silence/speech’’ are not helpful—but rather—it is through looking at the details of history that we question the analytical tools we have used to understand history.

Black Women, Publicness and Political Involvement

There seems to be tension regarding the nature of black women’s publicness in the 1920s and 1930s. This tension is expressed by Healy-Clancy, who posits that

> [w]hile scholars have generally characterized women as marginal to African nationalism during this period, women were in fact only marginal to the realm of male-dominated political groups, in which the ANC was prominent. (Healy-Clancy 2014, 482)

Behind this tension are questions about women’s publicness, which are seldom discussed—because “gender is silenced by race, as it so often is because of nationalism, apartheid, and colonialism” (Daymond et al. 2003, 2)—thus removing the possibility of looking at the specificities of women’s experiences. This article highlights the need to rethink the grand narrative, where the private (the home as wife or domestic helper) is the realm for women, while the public is the realm for men. The works of Maxeke and Mgqwetho offer an opportunity to talk about the implications of rupturing the narrow understanding of black women’s publicness.

The writings by Maxeke and Mgqwetho “remains a politically vigorous means of constructing visibility, accountability, and the meaning of time” (Bennett 2000, 4), as it informs us of the gaps in respect of the role of women in the 1920s. Based on works of scholars such as Higgs (2004), Gaitskell (1983), and Healy-Clancy (2013), the narratives about black women are shaped by women in public protesting, finding work in urban spaces, dominated mostly by men at the time, and the active process of domesticating

black women both in rural and urban areas. Underpinning all this is education, as well as the political responses from the black population during the fraught political moment of the 1920s and 1930s.

I use the notion "publicness" to refer to the visibility of women who participated in public discourse during the 1920s. Black women's historiography is usually analysed within the framework of the rise of the ANC, rather than within the frameworks of other organisations, which were also resisting alongside the ANC. The position of women in this political moment is understood in light of their erasure—and when research makes women more visible, they are seen to be doing the work that is seen as being valuable in this moment—such as Maxeke's testifying before the Inter-Departmental Pass Committee on behalf of the League (Limb 2010, 242). Maxeke testified alongside Daisy Nogakwa, M. Manana, A. Sishuba, C. Moloi, A. Mebalo, N. Dhlamini, M. Pitso, and Grace Lentaka. However, not much is known about these women as members of the League from Port Elizabeth and Orange Free State (Limb 2010). Mgqwetho's work especially complicates this erasure, because she was in fact, doing political work as a woman poet, but writing is not seen as the kind of work that a woman does—and therefore, even other feminist research seems to ignore her writing as political work—which begs the question: *how do we see women's agency if we are using the incorrect lens to see their work as valuable work?*

During this period, the writing of Adelaide Charles Dube was published in 1913 as evidence of the "earliest known example of a published poem written by a black South African woman" (Daymond et al 2003, 161) with the title *Africa: My native land*. Dube, like Maxeke, was also educated at Wilberforce University and came back to teach at Ohlange Institute with her husband, Charles Dube (John Dube's son) (Daymond et al., 2003). Her middle-class position raises questions on what it meant for her to have published her poem publically. Her poem was published during the same year the 1913 Land Act was enacted and on the eve of Dinizulu's (the Zulu king) burial. She was able to access the public press through her husband, who was the proprietor of the newspaper. While her poem is written in English, it reads as a precursor to Mgqwetho's poetry, which appears in the 1920s. It also provides evidence that women were involved in the conversation about land dispossession.

In her book, *Women and Resistance in South Africa,* Walker is at pains when describing the lived experiences of women in South Africa in order to account for their political involvement in the early twentieth century. She emphasises that it is crucial to understand that race or class does not necessarily make women a homogenous group; as she explains,

> The specific interaction of sex, class and race has taken different forms for different women at various times. It is this interaction that has defined their shifting, diverse positions and thus, ultimately, determined their political organisation. (Walker 1982, 8–9)

She paints a complex picture of the movements of women through various spaces, especially black women, who found themselves in urban areas looking for jobs or family members who had left to find work in the cities.

During this time the emerging voices amongst black women included those of Charlotte Maxeke, Lilian Tshabalala, and Florence Jabavu. Each of these women were involved in building organisations, which rallied women around particular causes—namely the Bantu Women's League, Daughters of Africa and Zenzele Clubs (respectively). My choice of these women in particular, is largely influenced by their visibility at the time and the extent to which their work influenced a seemingly large nexus of women. Walker writes that

> In the early 20th century the lives of most women were bounded by their domestic responsibilities, defined in terms of their role within the home and family. Few women were working outside the home, and those who were, were to be found mainly in domestic employment or brewing beer illegally. Women's direct contact with the public sphere of the economy and politics was very limited. (Walker 1982, 11)

This quote raises many questions, when examined in relation to black women like Charlotte Maxeke, Nontsizi Mgqwetho, Lilian Tshabalala, and Florence Jabavu (and many other women who worked alongside Maxeke and Jabavu, but did not enjoy the same visibility). These women seemed to occupy different positions—largely because of their class position as educated women of their time.

The works of Maxeke, Jabavu, and Tshabalala (amongst many other women they worked alongside, whose names have not been sufficiently recorded) were written in the context of nationalist politics—with the establishment of the SANNC in 1912. The gender bias in the nationalist movement has been highlighted in discussions about women and nationalism, as McClintock avers "[a]ll nationalisms are gendered, all are invented, and all are dangerous" (McClintock 1991, 104). The bias in the nationalism of the twentieth century begs the question: *how are we to make meaning of Maxeke and Mgqwetho's writing within the context which says that women's publicness was only in the form of the pass protests or in organisations for domestic training?* The question about publicness—which is elaborated upon below—already raises the questions around the invisibility of women—when women do not hold the positions they are expected to occupy. Moreover, Ginwala's analysis of the politics of the early twentieth century helps us consider that the same findings—which emerged in Fraser's analysis of the ideas of the bourgeois public that

> the view that women were excluded from the public sphere turns out to be ideological; it rests on a class and gender biased notion of publicity, one which accepts at face value the bourgeois public's claim to be *the* public. (Fraser 1990, 61)

This highlights the contested nature of public life, and the mistake of privileging one form of publicness (or publicity as used in Fraser's paper) that flattens out the politics of the day, and in the South African context, erases the work of women.

Where women have been fortunate to find a voice within public discourse, their contributions were not regarded as a form of intellectual contribution. Women are seldom seen as intellectual contributors in the nationalistic moment—as April, echoeing Boyce-Davies sentiments, in her analysis of Maxeke's legacy, posits, "women are not generally assigned importance as intellectual subjects" (Boyce-Davies 2008, 34), because the public discourse does not have a framework to measure women's participation in the world of ideas. Therefore, it is important to place Maxeke and Mgqwetho within this context, as evidenced by April (2012), that Maxeke's writing and speeches were a form of intellectual contribution in the same manner that Mgqwetho's poetry was part of the political conversation of the 1920s.

Theorising Women's Visibility and Publicness

It is useful to understand Maxeke and Mgqwetho's writings within the concept of publicness, because they were part of the public, which Warner explains as "the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation" (Warner 2002, 86). Maxeke and Mgqwetho's contributions to the black press of the 1920s place them in a unique position in light of the discussion above, about the role and position of black women in the early twentieth century in South Africa. Furthermore, the texts analysed in this article are written in isiXhosa. The use of isiXhosa raises more questions about the nature of the public, who would be reading Maxeke and Mgqwetho's ideas and further speculate as to why they both decided to write in isiXhosa: who were they writing for? While Maxeke is known to have written in English in various other platforms, Mgqwetho's poetry in the 1920s was written solely in isiXhosa and translated into English in 2007. This use of isiXhosa, however, was not unusual (as it is in the contemporary public discourse in South Africa), given that the black press of the nineteenth and twentieth century took a multilingual approach in its newspapers, where there was a mixture of English and African languages such as isiZulu, isiXhosa and seSotho, depending on the region and readership of the paper.

I use Fraser's idea of the counterpublic, who asserts that Habermas's concept of the public is exclusionary and "bourgeois masculinist" (Fraser 1990, 62). As Warner elaborates "[a] counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status" (Warner 2002, 86). I have also employed the concept of publicness already, in order to capture the essence of the presence and visibility of women in public discourse. I use both these concepts to differentiate between the worlds, which women were seen to occupy, where the domestic or private sphere was contrasted with the ''public'' sphere: "the extensive, residual but gendered category incorporating the market, civil society,

and the state" (Rendall 1999, 478). This may be a superficial distinction, but one that is helpful in bringing an understanding of the importance of the work done by Maxeke and Mgqwetho on public platforms.

Because of Maxeke's class position, political work and education; and Mgqwetho's proximity to the newspapers (very little is known about Mgqwetho, and thus it is difficult to situate her completely), it is important to understand the nature of their publicness in the 1920s. Mgqwetho and Maxeke write and contribute to public discourse in a world that does not recognise them as worthy of citizenship. As black women involved in the politics of their day, they are fighting against the oppression of the newly formed Union, which did not recognise black people as citizens of the Union—while they are fighting and writing against black men, who founded their own party, the SANNC, which excluded the official membership of black women as equals. Thus, Maxeke's creation of the Bantu Women's League (BWL) in 1918, and her writings in 1920, need to be understood within this context. The contradiction evidenced by the fact that Maxeke and Mgqwetho are given space to write critically, with no political power, raises questions about the nature of the 1920s public sphere in South Africa; as well as the crucial role played by black newspapers during this period. Maxeke and Mgqwetho's writings create an alternative discourse; not only as women's writings, but particularly, black women during the 1920s.

The use of the public sphere also brings into question the accessibility of newspapers, such as *Umteteli waBantu,* and the readership of the paper. This question could be understood in relation to what has been written about *Abantu-Batho,* where *Umeteteli waBantu* was seen to be in competition with *Abantu-Batho* (Limb 2012). Opland's extensive analysis of Mgqwetho's significance during the 1920s sheds some light on the rivalries and tensions between *Abantu-Batho* and *Umteteli waBantu,* as well as the SANNC and Marshall Maxeke's more moderate organisation, African Moderate Movement (Opland 2012). This further highlights the centrality of newspapers in establishing and shaping public discourse at the time. It seems that newspapers were accessible and seemed to be responding to an urban readership, which responded to the "intellectual, social, literary and economic aspirations, as well as the political aspiration" (Limb 2012, xii).

Maxeke and Mgqwetho in Conversation

Mgqwetho's poetry, *Imbongi uChizama* makes mention of both Marshall Maxeke and Charlotte Maxeke as equal (poem published on 23 October 1920), which is significant, given the importance of their work together as a couple, and as individuals; but very little research has considered the Maxekes' equality in public discourse and politics. Mgqwetho's poem gives the first clue that this is an area which needs further research.

Maxeke's letter begins with a reference to a previous article about the work and success of the League in Pietersburg, which begins: "*Kute kwixesha elidluleyo safunda kwipepa*

la "Abantu Batho" ngendaba ye league e-Pietersburg sabulela kakulu ukuva inqubo yamakosikazi entle ePietersburg" ("A while ago we read in the paper *Abantu-Batho* about the news about the League in Pietersburg; we were very grateful when we heard about the wonderful progress being made by the women in Pietersburg"). This is significant—given the rivalries amongs newspapers at the time... Maxeke continues "*ipile ngapezulu kune yaseJohannesburg umzi omkhulu*" ("[The League] is in a healthier position than the bigger branch in Johannesburg"). It seems that the women in the League were also using their own finances to support the work of Congress as auxiliary members of Congress; because "*ayenzile imisebenzi nemigudu emikulu, azihlanganisile nemali ezinkulu encedisa kwimisebenzi nezipitipiti ze Congress eJohannesburg*" ("they have done great work in collecting money to help with the business of Congress"). However, this positivity ends with a caution that suggests something is amiss between the two organisations: "*Into yokuvuza kwetunga*[1] *abasengela kulo abe Congress asilo tyala labo abafazi*" ("if there are problems within the Congress, these are not the fault of the women"). This article confirms research which characterises the 1920s, as a fractured and troubled time for Congress (Limb 2012).

Mgqwetho's poetry makes similar criticism in her poem, *Uqekeko lweCongress* ("The split within Congress"), published in November of the same, year where she writes "*Namhla sigagene/Tyapile wenjenje/Utyile amanyala*" ("Today we're a team/you've done a good job/exposing the filth"). The poem effectively exposes Congress, while defending Marshall Maxeke's role in creating an alternative to Congress. The intensity of Mgqwetho's diction echoes Maxeke's sentiments in addressing the problems within Congress. The rest of Mgqwetho's poem addresses, not only the split within the Congress, but the extent to which very few of the organisations at the time responded to the needs of the people. This is seen in the question "*Yiyipina ke kuzo/Eginyisa amate/Nenika abantu itemba/Lokubuyiswa kwe Afrika?*" ("Which one of the two/appeals to the people/raises their hopes/of Africa's return").

In her letter, Maxeke continues to account for the differences between the Congress in Pietersburg and in Johannesburg; where the Congress in Pietersburg seems to be less plagued by problems, because there are no diverging opinions in the leadership amongst the men because in "*Pietersburg iBranch ye Congress inye, ngako oko ke nezimvo zamadoda akona zinye…Itunga abasengela kulo alivuzi*" ("In Pietersburg there is a single Congress branch and their opinions are united…there are no problems"). This is in contrast to what is happening with the Congress in Johannesburg, where it seems, Congress is fractured into three branches, based on disagreements, as well as being biased towards Dube's leadership: "*Mazulu ekokelwa yendala inkokeli into ka Dube*" ("the Zulus who prefer the leadership of Dube[2]"). Maxeke seems to suggest that the men in Johannesburg want to see the same divisions amongst the women in the League;

1 *Ukuvuza kwetunga:* leaking milk pail (idiomatic expression) to suggest that something is losing value.

2 John Langalibalele Dube.

as she elaborates "*amanye amadoda sokuze axole ade abone pakati kwamakosikazi kugityiselwana ngamatye*" ("the men will never rest until they see friction amongst the women"). The problems within the Congress in Johannesburg are once again, echoed in Mgqwetho's poem quoted above: "*i-Congress iqekezwa/Ngo Funz'eweni baseJeppe/ Abamana beyipanda/Bexel'amahlungulu*" ("Congress is split by those in Jeppe/ urging us over the edge/crows who pick it over/scratching the ground for seed"). She poses a question, expressed in Maxeke's use of the proverb *ukuvuza kwetunga*: "*Itsha nganina/Indlu yeCongress*" ("Why is Congress/put to the torch?")—though I prefer the translation, "why is the Congress on fire", which clearly communicates the calamity within the organisation.

Maxeke makes mention of a Clique, a group of leaders within the Congress, who have made a decree about the League without any consultation. The tone in Maxeke's voice suggests that she takes great exception to the actions of the Clique, who does not seem to have its priorities right. It is not clear for me who the members of the Clique are, but it is important to note that the culture of factions was part of the culture of a weakened ANC during the 1920s (Walshe 1987).

In order to find some clues about the ''Clique'' that Maxeke refers to, it is important to note the relationship between the SANNC (Congress) and the Transvaal Native Congress, which Limb[3] explains:

> The 1919 constitution of the Transvaal Native Congress (from the 1920s Transvaal African Congress, or TAC) recorded *Abantu-Batho* as its organ and in the late 1920s it became the organ of the national ANC. Based in Johannesburg, editors tended to have overlapping membership of both (Limb 2012, 50–51).

This explanation is significant, because in 1921 Makgatho makes reference to a ''Clique'' in his letter to *Umteteli waBantu,* referring to levels of intolerance in the politics at the time:

> It seems that any person regardless of his/her level of education, if one does not go along or work together with the 'Bantu-Batho' clique, is deemed to be uneducated/poorly educated; and does not have the ability to lead the nation! … We watch with trepidation as canons and pistols are being shot at the late son of Msane. … It is from this same clique that we heard loud noises of grievances against Reverend Dube. … Now today we see the clique publishing further insults in its newspaper suggesting that the President of the S.A.N.N.C and the President of the Transvaal Native Congress [Makgatho] is just poorly educated, someone who should be thrown out of office! … . (Makgatho, as quoted by Limb 2012, 50–51)

3 I am grateful to Prof Limb's email correspondence, which pointed me to this section of his books, which provides clues to the reference to the ''Clique.'' According to him, this is the extent of the connection, which he can make to the ''Clique'', which Maxeke refers to.

This extract by Makgatho seems to be a direct response to Maxeke and Mgqwetho's writings, amongst a chorus of other writers, who were very critical of both his leadership (particularly in the Congress), and the factions in the party. As Limb points out, there was a great deal of dialogue and rivalry, which was expressed through the newspapers (Limb 2012). It is very clear that those who were politically involved communicated through newspapers and responded directly to each other's opinions. This is evident in Maxeke's letter and Mgqwetho's poetry, as well as Makgatho's letter, in responding to various criticism made to his character and leadership. It seems the newspapers became a mode of driving political debates and discourses. Limb also points to the fact that the nature of the cliques changed over time; and he was circumspect about mentioning any names because "this seems to shift around a bit"[4]. Furthermore "Ironically, Makgatho and other critics used the paper for their own ends, suggesting that the composition of cliques could change or a need to maintain broad factional support and also that the real issue was not so much *Abantu-Batho* as political influence over the direction of the black press" (Limb 2012, 321–322). In her poem, *Imbongikazi noAbantu-Batho,* Mgqwetho addresses Mvabaza (the editor of *Abantu-Batho*) directly: *Wena "Abantu-Batho"/Wawuba uyakusala/negama lobugosa/Umteteli wa Bantu/kudala akubonayo/ Uyimvaba engenawo namanzi/eyode izale onojubalana* ("*Abantu-Batho/*you thought you'd retain/the title of guardian/Umteteli wa Bantu saw right through you: /you're a sack without water/left to breed tadpoles"). She continues to say that Mvabaza is no match for Maxeke and his paper, because Maxeke is a man of God, while she accuses Mvabaza of being unethical.

Maxeke makes a list of political issues, which should be discussed, instead of the internal conflicts, which seem to be taking precedence over the real concerns facing black people at the time. Maxeke also elaborates on the autonomy of the League, in relation to the Congress, because she does not take kindly to the influences of the Clique "*Kuba ngemfanelo akuko nyatelo lululuhlobo lunokuze lwenzeke abanini ntlanganiso bengalazi ngabo*" ("because it is not possible for decisions to be made without people present at the meeting not being informed of certain decisions"). It seems that Congress has made a decree without informing members of the League, and Maxeke is exposing them for their attempt to undermine the autonomy of the women in the League[5].

Maxeke's criticism is very scathing of the Congress, because she poses the question "*eloqela belisenza lompoposho belizizitunywa zayipina intlanganiso njengokuba zimaqela matatu nje, kuba yona iLeague yabafazi ayikange itume mntu e Komani kwintlanganiso yamadoda*" ("this group which made pronouncements on behalf of the League were endorsed by which grouping because there seem to be three groupings;

4 Email correspondence with Peter Limb, July 12, 2017.

5 The content of the decree can only be traced to the article in *Abantu-Batho,* which Maxeke claims, she is responding to. Unfortunately, due to the poor archiving of *Abantu-Batho* records of the paper are difficult to find (Limb 2012).

because the League did not send anyone to Queenstown to the men's meeting"). Maxeke's accusation of Congress for undermining the decisions of the League seems to be characteristic of the fractures within the Congress—as she alludes to a recent meeting, where the national President of the Congress was complaining about "*nezenzo zenkokeli zase Johannesburg ekwenzeni kwazo izinto nezigqibo ezintweni ezinkulu ngapandle kwake engazazi yena, pofu enguMongameli (womlomo)"* ("the tendencies of the leaders in Johannesburg who are inclined to making their own decisions about serious matters without consulting the president; it seems he is just president by name"). It seems like Congress is no stranger to schemes *(iziKimu)* and scandals, which undermines the work of the organistion. More importantly, by describing the president of the Congress at the time[6] as "*umongameli womlomo*"—a president only by name, highlights how weak the Congress was—even within the highest levels of its leadership. Mgqwetho also addresses Makgatho's leadership, and seems to be admonishing him "*Vuka! Nto ka Makgatho/Wapepeza na umoya?/Ungawazi apo uvela kona/Nalapo usinga kona?*"[7] ("Wake up Makgatho, the air's in motion!/Why can't you tell/where the wind comes from/or where its blowing"). She repeats these words at the end of the poem—as though she is begging Makgatho to realise the failures of Congress: "*Vuka ke nto ka Makgatho/ufune izibuko/Nango umoya ukuq'ola/Wevumba elitshonisa/Inqanawe ye sizwe/Camagu ke! Mahlala bemsusa*!"). It seems, according to both Maxeke and Mgqwetho, that Makgatho was a weak leader, who did not seem to have any handle on the Congress, nor the direction Congress should be taking in the midst of all the political instability. Maxeke is sceptical of the fact that Congress would be able to accomplish the real work of the organisation—since it seems to be more concerned about the schemes within the party, and in effect, seems to be a leaderless organisation. She is saddened by the internal politics, which seem to take precedence over the political work, which should be pursued for the future benefit of the African people.

It is important to contextualise the state of Congress in the 1920s. In Sol Plaatje's biography, Willan describes a very fractured and unhealthy organisation as "Congress—as a national organisation with any claim to express the aspirations of the African people of South Africa as a while—was dead" (Willan 1984, 298). Part of the reason for this discontent emanates from the fact that those who wanted a more radical approach could not find that space within the Congress; and thus, opted for alternatives in other burgeoning organisations.

With this context in mind, it is clear that Congress was beleaguered by conflicts with Cliques and schemes as Maxeke asserts. Her article bears testimony to the fact that the women in the League were affected by this instability, but is also critical about the internal strife within Congress.

6 Sefako Makgatho.
7 line 98–101, 21.

While pointing to the faults within the political organisation, Maxeke makes reference to "*iMbongikazi, ebiviwa kude izibongo zayo*" ("a female poet whose poetry was heard far and wide"). As Opland has shown, Maxeke is referring to Nontsizi Mgqwetho. Maxeke makes this reference because her poetry was relevant to the political times—because reading the poetry "*kwabonakala ukuba usindiso lwetu selukufupi*" ("it seemed our salvation was not too far out of reach") highlighting the nature of Mgqwetho's poetry, which spoke directly to the context of the times. It seems it has been a while since Maxeke came across Mgqwetho's poetry as she explains: "*Asazi ukuba lowo waya pina, asisaziva izibongo nokuba naye seleshunqulwe intloko egoqweni na njengabo sibe site zizitunzela ze Congress ezihamba zingenentloko*" ("we don't know where she disappeared to, we no longer hear her poetry perhaps because she has also been silenced like those who are like ghosts within Congress who walk around as though they were headless/mindless"). By referencing Mgqwetho's poetry and significance, Maxeke reveals the nature of the public discourse, where people who are seen to be critical can be silenced or removed from public platforms. If this is the case, then this explains why Mgqwetho turned to newspapers to share her scathing poetry, which attacked Congress and its leadership, and the politics of the time. Mgqwetho's poetry appears

> on 23 October 1920, she sends poems to the newspaper regularly throughout the three years from 1924 to 1926, withdraws for two years until two final poems appear in December 1928 and January 1929, then disappears into the shrouding silence she first burst from. (Opland 2007, xiv)

Mgqwetho was already known publicly as she had performed her poetry at various concerts and gatherings (Opland 2012).

Maxeke suggests that in order for Africa's problems to be solved, the movement to freedom needs leadership who lead by example:

> *"Usindiso lwetu lu sekubeni sikokelwe ngamadoda angumzekelo, amadoda atanda um-Afrika ngapezu kunokuba ezitanda wona, amadoda anokushumayela umanyano ingezizo ingxabano, amadoda azenzo ziyintshumayelo ngokwazo ingeyiyo milomo yawo yodwa. Asinakupiliswa yimilomo ngokungakumbi apo kuko nabafunda ukwenza amakwelo."*
>
> ("Our salvation lies in the leadership by men who lead by example, men who love Africans more than they love themselves, men who preach unity and not discord, men whose actions are a lesson and do not simply say empty words. We cannot survive especially those who are in the habit of voicing their opinions."

Mgqwetho expresses the same sentiments in her poetry, in which she lambasts Congress for failing the people:

> "*Yatshona i Afrika ngabo/Kuba nenkanunu zeCongress/Nandzo zigquma/Ziqekeza amabandla*" ("They scuttle Africa/down there the big guns of Congress are roaring/pounding away at their own ranks"). Further down in the same poem "*Isizwe asiwafuni amaramnca/Avele*

ngomx'ak'emngxunyeni/Angenantlonipo ngumntu/Nangatembekiyo" ("The nation does not want those/who lurk in their lairs like wild beasts/heedless of others/betraying our trust").

Maxeke launches into an explanation about the kind of leaders Africa needs:

> *"amadoda okuk'usela abafazi besizwe sawo, ingenawo ahamba egqugula ukwenzakaliswa kwabafazi bakuba namehlo okwazi. Sifuna amadoda alusindiso lwe ntombi zesizwe sawo ezinokuwatemba ngobuko bawo. Sifuna amadoda ayakuti wona azitobe ukuze isizwe siwapakamise, abe zinkwenkwezi ze Afrika nakwizizukulwana ezizayo. Nantso into efunwa yi Afrika, nantso into elilelwa ngabafazi bayo nabayitandazelayo".*
>
> "Men who will protect the women of their nation, instead of men who plot to harm women who are becoming more knowledgeable. We want men who will humble themselves so that the nation will raise them up as legitimate leaders and they will shine like African stars for generations to come. This is what Africa wants, this is what the women are crying and praying for."

Both these texts are an analysis of political leadership. This is not simply a complaint, but Maxeke offers a different imagination about what is possible when leadership is taken seriously in the quest of changing the reality for African people in the 1920s. This seems to speak directly to the failures of Congress during the worker's strike, which sees a shift in support towards the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (I.C.U.). Mgqwetho's poem "*Imbongikazi noAbantu-Batho*" ("The women poet and *Abantu-Batho"*) also offers her analysis of leadership in a poem, which she contrasts with the leadership of Marshall Maxeke. Mgqwetho offers more insights in questioning Mvabaza[8]'s leadership and contrasting it with Rev. Maxeke's leadership:

"Wena Mvabaza uluyengeyenge	("You tremble, Mvabaza, like jelly[9]
Olweza lupetwe ngesikotile	Served on a plate;
Lwafika e Rautini	A Joburg Johnny-come-lately
Lwabona soluyi nkokeli	An overnight leader
Akuyiyo ke Inkokeli	You're no leader, Mvabaza,
Nakanye wena Mvabaza	And you will never be,
Ungumrwebi	All you can claim
Elona gama lakoNgubani owakubeka *Ukuba ube yinkokeli?*	Is the status of shopkeeper who named you a leader?[10]
Zikona nje Inkosi	We still have our chiefs
Ezadalwa ngu Tixo."	Established by God").

In this poem Mgqwetho suggests that Mvabaza has no credibility as a leader because he is not interested in the plight of the people but rather, he is interested in his social

8 Then editor of *Abantu-Batho.*
9 line 43–58, 27.
10 My translation.

standing (Nxasana 2016). On being an "overnight" leader, Mgqwetho highlights the notion of leadership as being work, rather than something one can acquire with ease. In fact, Marshall Maxeke seems to have more credibility than Mvabaza, because he is a minister and therefore, has been blessed by God to be in the position he is in. It seems a leader who has not been selected (ordained) by God is incapable of putting the interests of people above their own needs. As Nxasana points out, Mgqwetho sees "Congress leaders as untrustworthy leaders with self-serving interests parading as heroes and saviours of the nation whilst blind to the true state of the nation and its people who are looking to them to provide a way forward" (Nxasana 2016, 20).

Maxeke seems to be openly making demands to Congress and the political leaders who were mostly men. She demands to have leaders who are considerate if the plight of the African people they represent is to change. Maxeke's analysis of the activities of the Congress suggests that the men in leadership positions are letting down the movement, because they are overly concerned with plotting and scheming within the party, and destabilising the work of the League in the process. The leaders are more concerned about their own egos, rather than carrying out their mandate of uplifting the nation. Maxeke's letter is not simply a letter to the editor, but rather, it is a direct political critique to the Congress. It is also an analysis of the weaknesses within Congress and the ramifications of this weakness in the political work that needs to be done.

Conclusion

Maxeke's critique is mirrored in Mgqwetho's poetry. This analysis suggests that these two women used their words to speak directly to the problems that people experienced in their times. They were in conversations with the leaders of the time and inadvertently, in conversations with each other as women, who had access to the public domain, and whose voices seemed to matter to the editors of the paper. This level of publicness seems to go against the notion that women were expected to be in the home, while the domain of politics was reserved for men. It seems Black women in the early twentieth century did not have this luxury—given their involvement in the anti-pass laws in 1913. Perhaps there is more historical evidence, which needs to be included, which challenges this notion—because black women were coming into the urban settings looking for work—and the writings of Maxeke and Mqwetho, beg the question: *were they silent or were they marginalised because they refused to be silent?* More importantly, this work implores us to go back to the archive and find women who contributed, because we would be lacking in insight if we simply hold Mgqwetho and Maxeke as exceptional—and therefore, the only women who contributed to public discourse in the early twentieth century.

References

April, T. 2012. "Theorising Women: The Intellectual Contributions of Charlotte Maxeke to the Struggle for Liberation in South Africa." PhD diss., University of the Western Cape.

Bennett, J. 2000. "Introduction: The Politics of Writing." *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 46: 3–12.

Blunt, A., and Rose, G. 1995. "Introduction: Women's Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies." In *Writing Women and Space: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies,* edited by A. Blunt and G. Rose, 1–19. New York: The Guilford Press.

Boyce-Davies, C. 2008. *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Burton, A. 2005. "Introduction: Archive Fever, Archive Stories." In *Archive Stories: Facts, Fiction and the writing of History* edited by Burton, A. London: Duke University Press.

Chadya, J. M. 2003. "Mother Politics: Anti-Colonial Nationalism and the Woman Question in Africa." *Journal of Women's History* 15(3): 153–57.

Daymond, M., Driver, D. Meintjes, S. Molema, L. Musengezi, C. Orford, M. and Rasebotsa, N. 2003. "Introduction." In *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region,* edited by Daymond et al., 1–82. New York: Feminist Press.

Erlank, N. 2003. "Gender and Masculinity in South African Nationalist Discourse, 1912–1950." *Feminist Studies* 29(3):653–671.

Fraser, N. 1990. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Social Text* 25/26: 56–80.

Gaitskell, D. 1983. "Housewives, Maids or Mothers: Some Contradictions of Domesticity for Christian Women in Johannesburg, 1903–39." *The Journal of African History* 24(2): 241–256.

Gasa, N. 2007. "Let them Build more Gaols." In *Women in South African History* (1st ed), edited by Gasa, N, 129–152. Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council.

Ginwala, F. 1990. "Women and the African National Congress 1912–1943." *Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 77–93.

Healy-Clancy, M. 2014. "The Daughters of Africa and Transatlantic Racial Kinship: Cecilia Lilian Tshabalala and the Women's Club Movement, 1912–1943." *American Studies: A Quarterly* 59(4): 481–499.

Healy-Clancy, M. 2013. *In a World of their Own: A History of South African Women's Education*. Durban: University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Press.

Higgs, C. 2004. "Zenzele: African Women's Self-Help Organizations in South Africa, 1927–1998." *African Studies Review* 47(3):119–141.

Jordan, A. C. 1973. *Towards an African Literature: The Emergence of Literary form in Xhosa Literature.* Berkley: University of California Press.

Limb, P. 2010. “A Strong Seed in a Stony Bed: The 1920s.” In *The ANC's Early Years: Nation, Class, and Place in South Africa before 1940,* edited by Limb, P, 235–288. Pretoria: UNISA Press.

Limb, P. 2012. “Only the Bolder Spirits: Politics, Racism, Solidarity and War in *Abantu-Batho.”* In *The People's Paper: A Centenary History and Anthology of Abantu-Batho,* edited by Limb, P, 49–80. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

Limb, P. 2012. “Introduction: A Centenary and Anthology of Abantu-Batho, The People’s Paper.” In *The People's Paper: A Centenary History and Anthology of* Abantu-Batho, edited by P. Limb, 1–48. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

Maxeke, C. 1920. “Ukubiwa kweLeague.” *Umteteli waBantu,* June 12, 1920 (Accessed from Readex: African Newspapers).

McClintock, A. 1991. “‘No Longer in a Future Heaven’: Women and Nationalism in South Africa.” *Transition* 51:104–123.

Mgqwetho, N. 1920. “Imbongi uChizama” (Chizama the poet). In *The Nation's Bounty: The Xhosa Poetry of Nontsizi Mgqwetho,* edited by Opland, J, 2. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

Mgqwetho, N. 1920. “Imbongikazi Nontsizi uChizama” (Nontsizi Chizama, the woman poet). In *The Nation's Bounty: The Xhosa Poetry of Nontsizi Mgqwetho,* edited by Opland, J, 2. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

Mgqwetho, N. 1920. “Uqekeko lwe Congress (The Split within Congress).” In *The Nation's Bounty: The Xhosa Poetry of Nontsizi Mgqwetho,* edited by Opland, J, 8. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

Mgqwetho, N. 1920. “Imbongikazi NoAbantu-Batho” (“The Woman Poet and Abantu-Batho)”. In *The Nation's Bounty: The Xhosa Poetry of Nontsizi Mgqwetho,* edited by Opland, J, 16. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

Nxasana, T. 2016. “Nontsizi Mgqwetho’s *The Nation's Bounty:* A Prophetic Voice towards an African Literary Theory.’’ PhD diss., Rhodes University

Odendaal, A. 2016. *The Founders: The Origins of the ANC and the Struggle for Democracy in South Africa.* Johannesburg: Jacana.

Opland, J. 2012. “Abantu-Batho and the Xhosa Poets.” In *The People's Paper: A Centenary History and Anthology of* Abantu-Batho, edited by Limb, P, 201–225. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

Rendall, J. 1999. “Women and the Public Sphere.” *Gender & History* 11(3): 475–488.

Switzer, L. 1988. “Bantu World and the Origins of a Captive African Commercial Press in South Africa.” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 14(3): 351–370.

Walker, C. 1982. *Women and Resistance in South Africa.* London: Onyx Press.

Walshe, P. 1987. *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa.* Johannesburg: A.D. Donker.

Warner, M. 2002. "Publics and Counterpublics." *Public Culture* 14(1):49–90.