

New Perspectives on the history of Black Consciousness in South Africa

Ian Macqueen

(University of Pretoria, and Society, Work and Development Institute, Wits)

Leslie Anne Hadfield, *Liberation and Development: Black Consciousness Community Programs in South Africa* (Michigan, Michigan State University Press, 2016), xi + 255 pp., \$39.95 paperback, ISBN 978 1 61186 192 1.

Shannen L. Hill, *Biko's Ghost: The Iconography of Black Consciousness* (Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2015), xxviii + 366 pp., \$29.95 paperback, ISBN 978 0 8166 7637 8.

Rico Devara Chapman, *Student Resistance to Apartheid at the University of Fort Hare: Freedom Now, A Degree Tomorrow* (Lanham, Boulder, New York and London, Lexington Books, 2016), xii + 135 pp., \$80.00 hardcover ISBN 9780739192146.

Since the emergence of Black Consciousness in South Africa in the late 1960s, the movement, its ideas and its leaders have all been the source of a great amount of scholarly interest, and with justification.¹ A movement of black tertiary education students, in the space of less than ten years, was able to successfully challenge the might of the apartheid regime, through its ideas as much as its actions, as the SASO Nine trial of 1975 to 1976 would so clearly show. The movement, its iconic leaders, its contribution to the Soweto Uprising, its political philosophy and links to theology, its continuities with older forms of political thinking have all been aspects of study of the movement. It is an indication of the richness of Black Consciousness that it still garners scholarly attention, especially as scholars have now pointed to at least two key areas that histories of Black Consciousness have neglected: its practical and theoretical contribution to community development and the impact of Black Consciousness on the arts in South Africa. In addition, a story that continues to unfold is the sustained civic involvement of Black Consciousness adherents, who were among the first crop of black Vice Chancellors to serve at South African institutions of higher education, such as Barney Pityana (University of South Africa), Mamphela Ramphele (University of Cape Town) and Mbulelo Mzamane (University of Fort Hare). It is a coincidence that all three of the scholars looked at in this review hail for the United States, but nonetheless they fit into a continuum of American writing of the history of Black Consciousness in South Africa that is only rivalled by black South African scholars themselves.

From its emergence, Black Consciousness quickly registered on the radar of s American professor Gail Gerhart, who interviewed Biko, and in the process of her research created and

¹ My thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback on this review article.

bequeathed an invaluable archive for generations of researchers to come.² Her book, *Black Power in South Africa: The evolution of an ideology* was the first to document the rise of Black Consciousness, which she situated in a continuum of Pan Africanist thinking in South Africa.³ Building on the scholarship of Gwendolyn M. Carter and Thomas Karis, Gerhart would more than a decade later make her research further publically available, as part of the landmark *From Protest to Challenge* series, with the fifth volume, *Nadir and Resurgence, 1964 – 1979*, which she wrote and compiled with Karis.⁴ Gerhart used the term ‘Black Power’ to describe Black Consciousness in South Africa, a term which Black Consciousness activists consistently rejected for the reason that it implied an uncritical application of an American ideology to a South African context, as Mandela accused the movement of whilst writing from prison in 1978.⁵ Gerhart’s use of the term gives us insight into the hold and resonances of American history in witnessing the events unfolding in South Africa.

It was and is perhaps the power of this resonance with American history that has inspired a remarkable scholarly effort from that country; starting from Gerhart it is no exaggeration to say that American scholars have dominated the scholarship on Black Consciousness in South Africa. It was an interest that took time to develop as following Gerhart, the 1980s saw only one book published on Black Consciousness by an American, a fact perhaps attributed to the sense that Black Consciousness was on the wane in that decade. Robert Fatton Jr. provided this, a rigorous book-length engagement with the ideology of Black Consciousness, which while weak historically, helpfully pointed to the theoretical contribution of Black Consciousness.⁷ In contrast, since the 1990s the bulk of American writing on Black Consciousness emerged. Anthony Marx emphasised the continuities of what he called the ‘lessons of struggle’ in the Black Consciousness Movement in a book that borrowed from the idea for its title.⁹ George Fredrickson provided an authoritative comparative history between Black Consciousness and Black Power in the United States, helpfully distinguishing the two movements.¹⁰ C.R.D. Halisi also placed Black Consciousness in a continuum of thought, observing that Black Consciousness could be located in what he called ‘black republicanism’, a tradition of thinking that could be identified by two tenets: that Africans constituted the sole source of revolutionary legitimacy, and that virtually all classes of whites were allied in support of racial domination. Halisi presciently noted the strong likelihood of the re-emergence of black republicanism, given its historical longevity, a prediction that seems to

² Due to limited space, this review will only consider monographs and not journal articles, book chapters, or theses.

³ G. Gerhart, *Black Power in South Africa: The Evolution of an Ideology* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, California University Press, 1978).

⁴ T. G. Karis, and G. M. Gerhart., *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa 1882-1990. Volume 5 Nadir and Resurgence, 1964-1979* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1997)

⁵ N. Mandela, ‘Whither the Black Consciousness Movement? An Assessment’, in *Reflections in Prison*, ed. M. Maharaj (Cape Town, Struik, Zebra Press and Robben Island Museum, 2001), pp. 21–64.

⁷ R. Fatton, *Black Consciousness in South Africa: The Dialectics of Ideological Resistance to White Supremacy* (New York, University of New York Press, 1986).

⁹ Anthony W. Marx, *Lessons of Struggle: South African Internal Opposition, 1960 – 1990* (New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹⁰ G. Fredrickson, *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa* (New York, Open University Press, 1995).

have been justified with the emergence of movements such as Black First Land First and in aspects of the Fallist movement at South African universities.¹¹ More recently Daniel Magaziner provided a stimulating account of Black Consciousness, drawing from over thirty oral interviews, and penned the first explicitly intellectual history of the movement that emphasised its links to theology.¹² It is on the strength of this collective, sustained effort over the last almost forty years that the monographs of Hadfield and Hill fit into a continuum of American research on the Black Consciousness Movement.¹³ To explain this burst of American interest in Black Consciousness, post-apartheid, it is not sufficient to point to the anniversaries of the Soweto Uprising of 1976, or Biko's death. It rather indicates, it seems, an abiding sense of historians needing to recover what was silenced in the exigencies of the negotiations of the early 1990s and what socio-economic problems remains frustratingly and tragically in place.

As noted, this powerful tradition has only been rivalled by black South African scholars and Black Consciousness adherents. One aspect of this tradition was the inspiration of Black Theology, which facilitated one of Biko's first published essays, 'Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity' in a book edited by Mokgethi Motlhabi, called *Essays on Black Theology*.¹⁴ The foremost source, however, of course remains Biko's collected writings, originally published in 1978 and republished many times since.¹⁵ In the 1980s black South Africans were the dominant voice on the history of Black Consciousness, publishing at least three accounts: writing from the United Kingdom the political scientist, Sam Nolutshungu provided a stimulating and immediate account of the ideology that remains a critical text;¹⁷ it was followed by Motlhabi's *The Theory and Practice of Black Resistance to Apartheid*, which assessed the significance of Black Consciousness through a socio-ethical framework;¹⁸ and SASO activist Mosibudi Mangena penned a valuable autobiographical account of his involvement in the movement.¹⁹ Starting in the 1990s, the invaluable edited collection by Barney Pityana, Mamphela Ramphele, Malusi Mpumlwana and Lindy Wilson was drawn from a conference in Harare in June 1990, which continues to function as an

¹¹ C.R.D. Halisi, *Black Political Thought in the Making of South African Democracy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1999). For the recent embrace of Black Consciousness, see for example H.K. Tafira, *Black Nationalist Thought in South Africa: The Persistence of an Idea of Liberation* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

¹² D. Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets: Black Consciousness in South Africa, 1968 - 1977* (Athens, Ohio University Press; Johannesburg, Jacana, 2010).

¹³ As a point of contrast, there are no monographs on the Black Consciousness Movement that have been produced by British historians to my knowledge, despite published work by David Howarth, Derek Hook and, most recently, Marcus Morgan.

¹⁴ Mokgethi Motlhabi, ed., *Essays on Black Theology* (Johannesburg, University Christian Movement, 1972). My thanks to Ernst Wolff for this insight.

¹⁵ Originally published as S. Biko, *I Write What I Like* (London, Bowerdean Press, 1978). In 2017 Picador Africa released a 40th special edition to commemorate Biko's death with a foreword by Njabulo Ndebele.

¹⁷ S. Nolutshungu, *Changing South Africa: Political Considerations* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982).

¹⁸ Mokgethi Motlhabi, *The Theory and Practice of Black Resistance to Apartheid: A Social-Ethical Analysis* (Johannesburg, Skotaville, 1984).

¹⁹ M. Mangena, *On your Own: Evolution of Black Consciousness in South Africa/Azania* (Braamfontein, Skotaville, 1989).

excellent introduction to Black Consciousness.²⁰ Former South African Students' Organisation (SASO) president, Themba Sono, provided a reflection on *The Origins of Black Consciousness in South Africa*.²¹ There followed a publishing hiatus of fourteen years, until author Chris van Wyk compiled a collection of reflections of activists within and touched by the Black Consciousness Movement, poignantly titled *We Write What We Like*.²² It was a nostalgia countered by Andile Mnxgitama, Amanda Alexander and Nigel Gibson who edited a valuable collection that more pointedly explored the legacy of Black Consciousness in South Africa and its implications for current-day politics.²³ The public intellectual Xolela Mangcu, penned the first book-length biography of Biko,²⁴ to supplement Lindy Wilson's biographical chapter in *Bounds of Possibility*, which has now appeared as a Jacana pocket biography.²⁵

It is into this scholarly context that Leslie Hadfield's *Liberation and Development* constitutes a constructive addition to the literature on Black Consciousness, covering the neglected community development aspects of Black Consciousness. Drawing on her PhD from Michigan State University, Hadfield's book is another part of that institution's impressive contribution to Africanist scholarship. Based on meticulous oral research, Hadfield's book provides many new insights, among which the most arresting is the longevity of many of the projects of the Black Community Programmes (BCP) despite state proscription in 1977 and after: the Zingisa Education Trust established by Thoko and Malusi Mpumlwana after the collapse of the Ginsberg Education Fund, the Umtapo Centre founded by Deena Solair and Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) members between 1986 and 1987, the Is'Baya Development Trust launched by Peter Jones in 2002 and the Steve Biko Foundation run by Biko's son, Nkosinathi Biko, and established in 1998 (158-161). Together these initiatives indicate the continued positive contribution of Black Consciousness in the form of community development to South Africa. In taking this perspective, Hadfield demonstrates the value of the contributions of Black Consciousness as body of social praxis and thought. In doing so Hadfield shows the engagement of black students with the ideas of Paulo Freire, which is not a new insight, but Hadfield discusses this in greater depth than elsewhere in chapters 1 – 2. Hadfield points to three initiatives launched under the aegis of the BCP in the mid-1970s, each the subject of a chapter, namely the *Black Review* series, the Zanempilo Community Health Center and the Njwaxa Leather Home Industry, which I will consider in turn.

As Hadfield shows, *Black Review* was published consciously as a black alternative to the liberal South African Institute of Race Relations' *Survey of Race Relations in South Africa*,

²⁰ B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana, and L. Wilson, eds., *Bounds of Possibility: The Legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1991).

²¹ T. Sono, *Reflections on the Origins of Black Consciousness in South Africa* (Pretoria, Human Sciences Research Council, 1993).

²² C. Van Wyk, ed., *We Write What We Like: Celebrating Steve Biko* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2007).

²³ A. Mnxgitama, A. Alexander, and N. C. Gibson, eds., *Biko Lives! Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko* (New York and Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

²⁴ X. Mangcu, *Biko: A Biography* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2012)

²⁵ L. Wilson, *Steve Biko* (Johannesburg, Jacana Media, 2011).

which had been issued yearly since 1947. Operating from 1973 to 1976, during which time the BCP was able to issue three *Black Reviews* despite continued state harassment, the publication was designed to be a comprehensive survey of black organisations and activities throughout South Africa. *Black Review* communicated a message through its style and approach. For example, rather than beginning with a survey of white political parties as the SAIRR *Surveys* did, *Black Review* began with black organisations and chose not to use the labels 'Indian', 'Coloured' and 'African', and rather chose to discuss all aspects of black life according to themes such as education or art. Importantly, as Hadfield observes, the 'process of producing *Black Review* was just as significant as the product. The yearbook proved that black people could independently make a substantial publication and spurred the growth of black publishing in the 1970s' (64). As such *Black Review* was emblematic of the struggle for a black voice over and against white paternalism.

The subject of Hadfield's fourth chapter is the Zanempilo Community Health Centre. Founded in the rural village of Zinyoka, in an area of the Eastern Cape that fell under the Ciskei, the Centre opened its doors in 1975 (102-3). Hadfield is particularly attuned to the dynamics of gender in the Black Consciousness Movement and this chapter shows the unquestionable contribution of women in a multitude of roles, but particularly so through BCP and Zanempilo. As Hadfield observes, 'In many ways, Zanempilo was a woman's world, greatly influencing the atmosphere and implicit messages of the clinic in regards to women. If not for the male doctors, two male ambulance drivers, and political visitors, Zanempilo would have been dominated by women' (120). This chapter also provides food for thought for those in the burgeoning field of medical humanities, locating Zanempilo in a wider history of medicine in South Africa.

The fifth chapter explores the creation of the Njwaxa Leather Home Industry. Started in the early 1970s by Father Timothy Stanton, a Community of the Resurrection clergyman (a fraternity that Trevor Huddleston and Aelred Stubbs belonged to), Biko and the BCP took over the project when Stanton's energy began to flag. With funding sourced through the BCP, it was able to develop from a cottage industry into a factory that employed many people from the village, enabling them to effectively clothe, feed and educate their families as Hadfield shows. Although the factory only operated for four years before it was destroyed by the state in 1977, Hadfield emphasises the positive contribution it played and the fond memories it evoked among the residents of Njwaxa.

Lastly, of particular interest, Hadfield points to the way in which the practical challenges students faced required them to ground their thinking. Hadfield remarks that 'Participating in community work also taught the students of their false assumptions about the natural harmony of the black community' (41), and she goes to document challenges BC activists faced from local black authority figures who sensed in the BCP a challenge to their own status and authority. Hadfield's account is primarily limited to the Eastern Cape, although this is unavoidable as this was where the majority of BCP activities were located. Her focus of the range of BCP initiatives is also quite tightly focused on community development and the artistic involvement of the BCP thus receives little attention. However, we discover more of this area in Shannen Hill's study.

With *Biko's Ghost* Shannen Hill has produced an original monograph documenting the impact of Black Consciousness on South Africa art. It is telling that in the space of the introduction and first chapter, Hill covers the history of Black Consciousness when it legally operated through a broad set of organisations (from 1968 to 1977). Her remaining six chapters cover the period after 1977 and effectively demonstrate, through graphic evidence, the legacy of Black Consciousness and its continued influence through the 1980s and into post-apartheid South Africa. Her central message is that Black Consciousness never disappeared from the South African cultural landscape. Hill argues that Black Consciousness was rather silenced by the nonracialism of the African National Congress, or Charterism more broadly, which misrepresented Black Consciousness as racist and backward in thinking. Hill emphasises that Black Consciousness 'was about the power of voice, not race' (187).

Hill's focus is a welcome one, and reminds us that history leaves many traces and that a multi-disciplinary focus is a necessity for a full historical picture to emerge. Perhaps the most valuable insight of Hill is that 'Visual culture has played an enormous role in the ongoing life of Black Consciousness' (274). With this book, drawing on three years of fieldwork in South Africa, Hill has helped to broaden our appreciation of what Black Consciousness was and what it achieved. In over 300 pages, which includes both black and white and colour images, Hill demonstrates the continued influence of Black Consciousness and the deployment (and appropriation) of Black Consciousness-inspired imagery. Chief among these icons was the raised, clenched black fist, and the image of black hands breaking chains. Hill tracks the continuation of such motifs in a broad array of artists through the 1980s. Her account significantly broadens our appreciation of the impact of Black Consciousness, discussing the exploration of Black Consciousness-inspired themes in the work of artists such as Dikobe Martins, Ezrom Legae, Gerard Sekoto, Motlhabane Mashiangwako, Lefifi Tladi, David Koloane, Durant Silhali, Sam Nhlengethwa, Willie Bester and Donovan Ward, to name a few. Hill further creates a sense of the cultural context in which Black Consciousness emerged and demonstrates that Black Consciousness groups like SASO and BCP achieved what they did in concert with other African cultural groups, such as Dashiki. This helps overturn a blank-slate approach to our understanding of the impact of Black Consciousness. Cultural and artistic landmarks are foregrounded in this broader history, such as the Gaborone symposium on Culture and Resistance, held from 5-9 July in 1982, which ran concurrently with an exhibition at the National Museum and Art Gallery titled 'Art toward Social Development: an exhibition of South African Art'. Reading Hill's account together with Hadfield further widens our appreciation of the activities of the BCP, which Hill shows also funded art and artists such as The Gallery and the Thupelo Art Project (186).

If there is one nagging weakness, it is the small inaccuracies of historical detail in the introduction where Hill mistakenly claims, for example, that the University Christian Movement was founded in 1968 (it was founded in July 1967), that SASO was founded in Durban in 1969 (xvii), which is contradicted by an observation that Black Consciousness 'begins' in 1967 (xxiii). In fact, the planning meeting for the launch of what would become SASO was held at St Francis' College, Mariannhill in December 1968 and the organisation was only launched in July 1969 at the University of the North, and by this time Black

Consciousness was still by no means fully cast. Hill also mistakenly notes that Biko was banned to King Williams Town in 1972 (xiv), whereas he was only banned in 1973, after the interim report of the Schlebusch Commission. Lastly Hill labours the points somewhat that Black Consciousness was about voice and not race. This perspective is bent, one suspects, by the methodological lens that Hill employs; in reality Black Consciousness was inescapably about race, evident to name two examples, in Biko's injunction that race lay at the heart of exploitation of South African blacks, or the abiding tensions that continued to inform Black Consciousness's relations with progressive whites (though this was by no means was an unfruitful tension).

Lastly, it is telling that the image Hill chose for the cover was painted by South African artist Motlhabane Mashiangwako, titled *A Dedication to the People of Biafra: Four Meditations on the Biafran War* (1980). As Hill notes, Mashiangwako dedicated this work to the approximately three million people killed in the Biafran War (1967-1970) and in doing so communicated the way in which his 'liberatory vision reached across borders and boundaries' (182). This exemplifies a theme of Hill's book, that Black Consciousness constitutes an abiding contribution to struggles of the exploited peoples of the Global South, and in the case of Mashiangwako, showed an activism that 'was tricontinental in reach and aspiration' (181). Hill's book will appeal to both art historians and, as I have demonstrated, is relevant to our historical understanding of the impact of Black Consciousness.

If the history of Black Consciousness has left an indelible mark on community development and art in South Africa, its impact on higher education has been similarly notable. Michael Devara Chapman's history of student activism at the University of Fort Hare, while not specifically focused on Black Consciousness, nonetheless speaks to aspects of its impact on South African universities and provides a case study of the silencing faced by Black Consciousness adherents in the 1980s, alluded to by Hill. While Chapman observes that the 'ideological debate over Charterism or Black Consciousness' amongst other factors 'had profound effects on student resistance at Fort Hare' (56) he also quotes one former student reflecting how 'the Charterists debate had an edge of being powerful' at Fort Hare and how 'BC as a liberation movement was not popular at all' in the country in the 1980s but provoked 'vibrant' debate at the university with BC adherents (67). Chapman thus provides one example of a story that is more widely familiar, the side-lining and silencing of Black Consciousness by the Charterist position.

At only 120 pages, this is a limited history that may best serve as an introduction to the topic of the history of activism at the University Fort Hare, and should be read in conjunction with the more extensive study of Daniel Massey.²⁶ Chapman conducted nine interviews for the book, which includes new perspectives by Barney Pityana on his relationship with Biko and his activism at Fort Hare. The introduction includes a helpful review of literature on Fort Hare (4-5). Chapter one is an overview of the landscape of South African black education and also sketches the broader historical context the book engages with, whereas chapter two

²⁶ D. Massey, *Under Protest: The Rise of Student Resistance at the University of Fort Hare* (Pretoria, Unisa Press, 2010).

is focused on the impact of Black Consciousness and the ‘sham’ autonomy accorded to the university under Bantu Education. Chapter three notes the impact on Fort Hare as it fell under the authority of the Ciskei Bantustan and its leader, Lennox Sebe and the continued and heroic resistance of students to the Bantustan authorities. Chapter four looks at the efforts undertaken post-1990 to break the University of Fort Hare out of its Bantu Education mould, seeing the appointment of its first black Vice Chancellor, Dr Sibusiso Bengu with Oliver Tambo as its Chancellor, and attempts to restore the university as a flagship of African learning redolent of the history Chapman covers at the start of his book.

It is chapter 4 and the Conclusion that are particularly helpful in providing a sense of how Black Consciousness adherents provided leadership in the post-apartheid period, specifically stepping in to take on the difficulties of transforming the historically segregated and disadvantaged formerly black universities. As Chapman shows, after Tambo died and Dr Bengu resigned as vice chancellor of the University of Fort Hare in 1993 to take up a position in government, Mbulelo Mzamane, a prominent academic and well-known Black Consciousness adherent, agreed to the position, effective from 1 September 1994. Despite his credentials, Chapman shows that Mzamane was faced with the challenge of cost efficiency, which translated into a ‘precarious position’ (98) for him at the university. Chapman points to the problems Mzamane inherited but does not offer judgement as to why, by 1999, Mzamane was asked to take six months' paid leave under allegations of misuse of university funds, to be replaced by Professor Derrick Swarz, a former student activist of the University of the Western Cape. Chapman situates this particular narrative of failure and difficulty in a broader landscape of the continued challenges of transformation at South Africa's historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs), but we should also note Mzamane was willing to take on the monumental task, as did Ramphele and Pityana.

These new perspectives on the history of Black Consciousness in South Africa show us how limiting it is to situate Black Consciousness solely in a continuum of apartheid resistance, with its implied teleology. The reality is that the history of Black Consciousness is more multifaceted than many have cared to admit, continues after Biko's death and state repression in 1977, and is a history that continues to be written (in both senses). The scholarship on Black Consciousness, primarily in the United States and South Africa, as we have seen, has grown steadily since the 1990s. It is evident, with these latest additions to the scholarship on Black Consciousness in South Africa, that new avenues are now opening up, while, at the same time, American claims to this part of South Africanist scholarship are strengthened.