

BOOK REVIEW

Busani Ngcaweni, ed. *African Literature and Intellectual Histories: Reflecting on Ntongela Masilela's Work*. HSRC Press, 2024. xxxi + 322 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$45.00. Paperback. ISBN: 9780796926739.

African literary scholarship lost one of its most prolific and singular voices when Ntongela Masilela passed away in Bangkok in 2020. A South African intellectual who had spent decades in exile—first in Kenya, followed by Poland, East and West Germany, and then for many years at Pitzer College in California—Masilela devoted his career to excavating what he called the “New African Movement”: the vast, interconnected tradition of Black South African intellectual and literary life stretching from the late nineteenth century through to the country’s democratic transition of 1994. *African Literature and Intellectual Histories*, edited by Busani Ngcaweni and published posthumously by HSRC Press, gathers a wide-ranging selection of Masilela’s essays, lectures, and interviews and situates them in context, offering both a tribute to the man and a substantive contribution to the study of South African and continental African literary history. Ngcaweni, who first encountered Masilela at a 2010 conference and subsequently cultivated an intellectual friendship with him, brings evident warmth and scholarly care to the editorial task. The preface—part memoir, part intellectual portrait, part elegy—establishes the relational and political stakes of the project. It also candidly acknowledges that the volume’s title departs from Masilela’s own preferred framing (he had titled the manuscript *Historical Reflections During the Interregnum Period and the “New South Africa” Era*), a decision the editor defends on grounds of contemporary relevance while conceding the interpretive liberty such a change entails.

The collection spans seventeen chapters and covers ground that is, by design, both vast and somewhat labyrinthine. Readers will encounter detailed treatments of Nadine Gordimer’s landmark essay “Living in the Interregnum” (the subject of the opening and most theoretically orienting chapter), the historiography of South African literature, the Sophiatown Renaissance, the cultural politics of exile, the transatlantic connections between the New African Movement and the Harlem Renaissance, and extended reflections on figures ranging from H.I.E. Dhlomo—Masilela’s foremost intellectual ancestor, referenced, according to Ngcaweni, over three hundred times in this volume—to Solomon T. Plaatje, Es’kia Mphahlele, Peter Abrahams, Mazisi Kunene, and Lewis Nkosi. A particularly substantial contribution, constituting nearly a quarter of the book, is a long reproduction of an interview between Masilela and the young scholar Sandile Ngidi on the New African Movement. This portion of the text serves as a kind of pedagogical tour de force in which Masilela ranges from Xhosa literary history to questions of language, modernity, and Pan-African consciousness.

Masilela's prose is, as Ngcaweni rightly warns, demanding. Dense with proper names, cross-references, archival citations, and theoretical asides drawn from European Marxism, literary modernism, semiotics, and historiography, it makes demands of the reader that some will find exhilarating and others formidable. This is, in a sense, intentional: Masilela belonged to a generation of African scholars—alongside Bernard Magubane, Archie Mafeje, Es'kia Mphahlele, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o—who refused intellectual laziness and insisted on the complexity of the African archive. The sheer density of the work is itself an argument about what African literary history requires. Readers new to this tradition would benefit from approaching the volume selectively, using the introductory chapter and the Ngidi interview as interpretive keys before engaging the more specialist-oriented historical discussions.

The collection's greatest strength is its archival ambition. Masilela was above all an archivist—a scholar who understood that the intellectual history of Black South Africa had been systematically suppressed, dispersed, and undervalued, and who dedicated his career to its recovery and theorization. Through conscientious readings of newspapers like *Umteteli wa Bantu*, *Ilanga lase Natal*, and *Imvo Zabantsundu*, as well as the literary output of writers working in isiXhosa, isiZulu, and English, Masilela reconstructed a picture of intellectual life that most existing scholarship had either overlooked or distorted. The transatlantic chapters—on the connections between the New African and New Negro movements, on jazz and its reception, on figures like Paul Robeson and Langston Hughes as they intersected with South African cultural life—are among the most original and compelling contributions in this field.

Nonetheless, the volume is not without its limitations. The editorial decision to include chapters on China and on the “African Renaissance” of the Mbeki era alongside the more archival literary-historical work creates some thematic unevenness, and the book would have benefited from more substantial scholarly apparatus—that is, individual chapter introductions and editorial cross-references—to help readers navigate the different registers and historical moments at play. The lack of such framing means that newcomers to Masilela's work may struggle to situate each piece in its original context of production. These are, however, modest reservations about an important and genuinely moving volume. *African Literature and Intellectual Histories* accomplishes what posthumous collections of this kind aspire to do at their best: it makes an important body of work accessible, honors its author's intellectual commitments, and opens new lines of inquiry for subsequent generations of scholars. Ngcaweni's editorial care is palpable throughout, and the foreword by Chérif Keita—himself a distinguished scholar of African intellectual history—adds valuable context and warmth. For scholars of African literature, South African cultural history, and Pan-African intellectual traditions, this volume is essential reading.

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