

## The Intellectual Foundations of the Black Consciousness Movement

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The essential elements of an intellectual tradition require a retrospective reconstruction that involves learning from the closest contemporary exponents of the doctrine who their important intellectual forebears were and how their influence contributed to the essence of the tradition. In addition to this, it is necessary to take a quick look at the foundational texts that serve as guides to the tradition. In this way it becomes relatively easy to determine a canon that will operate as a basis for a hermeneutical approach to the tradition. In terms of this conception, it follows that it will be impossible to discuss Black Consciousness without taking into account the historical origins and development of its ideas. Further, one cannot understand the political or intellectual ideas of Black Consciousness in isolation without taking into account the philosophical, political, social and, if we may add, religious milieu from which they emanated. This chapter focuses on the intellectual traditions that constituted the basis of the Black Consciousness philosophy. Black Consciousness is both a movement and a philosophy. Since a lot has been written about both its historical origins and political dimensions,<sup>1</sup> I shall here pay more attention to its philosophical underpinnings. I argue that this philosophical dimension is traceable from a long line of a discursive field predicated on the lived experiences of African and African-descended people in diaspora and recently given expression by a philosophical tradition known as 'Africana philosophy'. The first section is a brief account of the origins of Black Consciousness, mediated through the comparable origins of the Negritude movement. The second part locates Black Consciousness within the ambit of Africana philosophy, particularly

Africana existential philosophy or Black philosophy of existence. The third part of the chapter is an excavation of the Caribbean, American and African foundations.

### **The movement and its historicity**

The circumstances under which the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) came into being and the reasons for adopting a seemingly negative, pejorative and offensive term as an identity tag significantly parallel those of the intellectual tradition under whose influence it came: the Negritude movement. In the early 1930s, under the leadership of Aimé Césaire (Martinique), Léopold Sédar Senghor (Senegal) and Léon-Gontras Damas (Guyana), black students in Paris from various parts of the black world (especially the Caribbean islands and Africa) constituted themselves into a cultural, intellectual, political and philosophical group around the concept of ‘negritude’ in response to the alienating situation of being-black-in-the-world dominated by whites.

For Césaire – one of the founders of the movement and credited with being the first to use the word ‘negritude’ – Negritude was a resistance movement against French racism and its assimilationist policy. Speaking about their struggle against racism, alienation and dehumanisation when they were students in France, Césaire articulates a philosophy whose origins and content reads as if it were a narrative about the origins of the South African Students’ Organisation (SASO) and Black Consciousness in South Africa three to four decades later:

We adopted the word ‘*négre*’ as a term of defiance. It was a defiant name. To some extent it was a reaction of enraged youth. Since there was shame about the word *négre*, we chose the word *négre* . . . There was in us a defiant will, and we found a violent affirmation in the words *négre* and *négritude* (Césaire 1972: 74).

According to Damas, the word ‘negritude’ was coined during what he calls ‘the most racist moment of history’ (cited in Macey 2000: 181), characterised by the search for black identity and desire for self-knowledge.

Similarly, Black Consciousness originated as a student reaction to apartheid racism. Just as the black students studying in Paris in the 1930s came together to form the Negritude movement as a result of their common

experiences of alienated consciousness, living in an anti-black white world without really belonging to it, so the black students in South Africa also came together to form SASO – the cradle of BCM – because of their experience of an alienated existence not only within the broader arena of their social and political existence governed by apartheid oppression, but also *qua* black students, within the white-dominated National Union of South African Students. While the Negritude movement re-appropriated a negative term ‘negro’ and gave it a positive signification, BCM turned the negative term ‘black’ on its head by attaching a positive meaning to it. In the very act of reclaiming the identity and definition the white world had taught them to loathe, and affirming it as an identity to celebrate and valorise, both Negritude and BCM consciously confronted the ‘double consciousness’ that W.E.B. Du Bois saw afflicting black existence.

In Paris, the black students’ journal, *L’Etudiant Noir*, was launched as a medium through which their views on African culture could be articulated. The description of the origin of Negritude as initially a student movement and its founding of students’ journals such as *Légitime Défense* (Legitimate Defence) and *L’Etudiant Noir* (The Black Student) bear undeniably a striking resemblance to the origins, philosophical and ideological orientation of BCM *qua* SASO and its various journals such as *SASO Newsletter* and *Black Viewpoint*.

In an interview by René Depestre, Césaire articulates a philosophy of Negritude in the 1930s that sounds just like a narrative about the origins of Black Consciousness in South Africa three decades later. He says:

[If] someone asks me what my conception of Negritude is, I answer that above all it is a *concrete* rather than an abstract coming to consciousness . . . We lived in an atmosphere of rejection and we developed an inferiority complex. I have always thought that the black man was searching for his identity. And it has seemed to me that if what we want is to establish this identity, then we must have a concrete consciousness of what we are – that is, of the first fact of our lives: that we are black; that we were black and have a history (Césaire 1972: 74, 76).

Negritude, therefore, was a preoccupation with questions of identity and liberation through self-consciousness and self-definition. Similar sentiments

and concerns were echoed by the editorial of the South African black student publication, *SASO Newsletter*. Referring to the reasons for the adoption of the concept of 'blackness', the editorial argued:

The term 'black' must be seen in its right context. No new category is being created but 're-Christening' is taking place. We are merely refusing to be regarded as non-persons and claim the right to be called positively . . . Adopting a collectively positive outlook leads to the creation of a broader base which may be useful in time. It helps us to recognise the fact that we have a common enemy (September 1970: 2).

In Césaire's understanding, Negritude was not only negatively an intellectual reaction to an alienated black consciousness, a struggle against white racism and its degrading effects, but was above all also positively an affirmation of the being of the black person. The question of identity for both Negritude and Black Consciousness became a pressing issue in anti-black societies. This identity problem results, as Césaire indicated above, in the persistent question: 'Who am I?' I shall return to this tradition and its impact on Black Consciousness in due course.

Having traced through the mediation of Negritude the origins of BCM in South Africa, a very brief genealogical excavation would be in order. Black Consciousness as black political thought is part of a long line of black activism and philosophical tradition dating back to the advent of African slavery, anti-black racism and colonialism in Africa and the modern world, what in the words of Enrique Dussel is the 'underside of modernity'. Documented evidence of it stretches from the nineteenth century with Martin Robson Delany's (1812–85) resistance of white paternalism, through to Frederick Douglass (1818–95), who inspired the Bikoan thesis that 'freedom is something that can only be taken, not given'; Du Bois (1868–1963) with his concept of 'double consciousness'; Marcus Garvey (1887–1940) and his Africanist views; Ana Julia Cooper (1858–1964) with her concept of black self-worth and agency; Alain Locke (1886–1954) during the Harlem Renaissance with its protest literature against American racism; into the Negritude of Césaire (1913–2008) and Senghor (1906–2001) and its emphasis on Negro pride and self-affirmation; the Pan Africanism of George Padmore (1903–59) and Kwame Nkrumah (1909–72); Robert

Mangaliso Sobukwe (1924–78) with his emphasis on unity and solidarity; the African socialism and self-reliance of Julius Nyerere (1922–99); Kenneth Kaunda's (b.1924) propagation of African humanism; to Frantz Fanon's (1925–61) anti-racism, anti-colonialism and actionality; Malcolm X's (1925–65) black nationalism; the Black Power movement of Kwame Ture (aka Stokely Carmichael 1941–98) and its call for black solidarity; and finally the black theology of James H. Cone (b.1938). This tradition, in its various forms, had as its main focus black resistance to white racism and white supremacy, black racial solidarity, group self-reliance, pride in black (African) heritage, black self-love, de-alienation and de-colonisation of the black mind, black cultural and racial identity. From this perspective, the Black Consciousness philosophy as originating from and having connections with this intellectual, political and cultural tradition becomes part of the larger philosophical tradition known as Africana philosophy whose leitmotif is to constantly raise the question of blackness.

### **Africana philosophy**

Black Consciousness has always, with justification but sometimes without any attempt at justification, been the only liberation movement whose ideas were generally referred to as a philosophy. Hence, expressions such as 'the philosophy of Black Consciousness' or 'Black Consciousness as a philosophy' were regularly made by the founders of the movement, not least by its followers. If philosophy, as Hegel contends, is consciousness come into its existence, then, by that very fact, Black Consciousness is not only a mode of philosophising but also a philosophy, *à la* Hegel's definition. For, in terms of the movement's definition, Black Consciousness is the black person's coming to consciousness of herself as black. More than this, Black Consciousness has as its primary concern questions arising from the phenomena of 'race' and 'racism'. Anti-black racism by its very nature essentially questions the humanity of black people. When one's personhood or humanity is called into question, concerns about one's humanity, identity and liberation take the centre stage in one's existence. The framing of black human existence constitutes not only an important aspect of an area of thought known as philosophical anthropology but, more directly, a philosophical tradition referred to as Africana philosophy.

Except for the one text recently published by Andile Mngxitama, Amanda Alexander and Nigel Gibson (2008), most recent publications on

Black Consciousness and Steve Biko either ignore or are oblivious to the self-evidently philosophical foundations of the movement. Some critics, especially professional philosophers, would question the philosophical credentials of Black Consciousness *qua* philosophy proper in the same manner in which the legitimacy of African philosophy was brought into question. Not only was Black Consciousness vague on its philosophical bases and objectives, argues Philip Frankel, it could also not identify its philosophical foundations: 'Since the notion Black Consciousness tends to be highly eclectic from an ideological point of view . . . it is extremely difficult even for its most intellectually advanced exponents to easily and precisely identify the philosophical undertones of the doctrine itself' (cited in Kotze 1975: 79). The reason for this shaky philosophical basis is presumably Black Consciousness's 'emphasis on the primacy of experience'. Sadly and probably unbeknown to Frankel, 'the primacy of experience' or 'lived experience' (lived-context) constitutes the motive of a philosophical tradition known as existential phenomenology. Since from a Husserlian point of view, phenomenology as a philosophical method moves from the stand point of 'back to the things themselves', this therefore requires that the phenomenologist must pay serious attention to lived experience as it is lived through our bodies. Indeed, phenomenologists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Lewis Gordon and Maurice Natanson have all engaged the meaning of the body as lived and experienced. The short-sightedness displayed by Frankel notwithstanding, I want to emphatically suggest that Black Consciousness can be located within the realm of a broader tradition known as *Africana* philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

The phrase 'Africana Philosophy' as defined by its formulator, Lucius Outlaw, is 'a "gathering" notion under which to situate the articulations (writings, speeches, etc.) and traditions of the same, of African and peoples of African descent collectively, as well as the sub-discipline - or field-forming, tradition-defining, tradition-organizing reconstructive efforts which are (to be) regarded as philosophy' (1996: 76). Outlaw's choice of 'Africana' as a qualifier is consistent with the practice of naming intellectual traditions in accordance with national, geographic or racial identities; for example, British, American, German, Chinese, Indian, or continental philosophy. As the gathering of practices and traditions of discourses, *Africana* philosophy is the philosophising of not only African and African

American thinkers but also embraces the philosophy of all people of African descent, wherever they are. In other words, Africana philosophy is for Outlaw an 'umbrella' term 'under which can be gathered a potentially large collection of traditions of practices, agendas, and literature of African and African-descended peoples' (77). Under this umbrella may thus be included literature, poetry, political writings, philosophical texts, art and proverbs from Africans on the continent and Africans in the diaspora. It is an intertextually embedded philosophy that draws from a multiplicity of sources of black intellectual production. What unifies these diverse traditions into an Africana philosophy is not a set of symbols or geographical space or, for that matter, strictly racial or ethnic affiliation but rather the agendas, norms and practices that are the result of 'the effort to forge and articulate new identities and life-agendas by which to survive and to flourish in the limiting situations of racialized oppression and New World relocations' (89).

Africana philosophy embraces a whole range of philosophical discourses and traditions such as African philosophy, African American philosophy, black philosophy, Afro-Caribbean philosophy and other such traditions that have emerged from the political and socially transformative discourses and shared concerns of persons African and African-descended in their resistance and struggle against slavery, imperialism, colonialism, racism and oppression. Since Black Consciousness has as its focus the problematics enshrined within Africana philosophy, it therefore constitutes a part of this tradition. More relevant to the essence of Black Consciousness, though, is the tradition within Africana philosophy known as Africana existential philosophy or simply black philosophy of existence.<sup>3</sup>

### **Africana existential philosophy**

Black existential philosophy is a systematic existential-phenomenological approach to the lived experience of black people in an intrinsically anti-black world. In such a world anti-black racism plays a dominant role in the lived experiences of black people. Hence black existential philosophy involves an exploration of the lived experience of the blackness of black people. This conception of black philosophy of existence in many significant ways encapsulates and articulates in almost precise terms Black Consciousness's philosophical orientation. The exponents of this philosophy understood quite clearly that – in the words of Biko – there

is no such thing as the 'black problem' but that the problem is quite simply white anti-black racism. This fundamental realisation locates Black Consciousness squarely within the ambit of Africana existential philosophy.

But more to the point, Black Consciousness is a form of consciousness, a mode of being-in-the-world. The category of 'consciousness' immediately situates it within the realm of phenomenology precisely because, in its Husserlian sense, phenomenology is an attempt to go back to the immediate substance of experience and to examine and describe this substance as it presents itself to consciousness. Consciousness as understood in phenomenology is, therefore, always relational and intentional; that is, it is always consciousness of *something*. Besides this foundation in an intentional theory of consciousness, existential phenomenology also rejects Cartesian notions of disembodied consciousness (*cogito*) by positing the notion of an embodied consciousness, what in Gordon's formulation, is 'consciousness in the flesh'. From this standpoint, Black Consciousness in its intentional mode is thus consciousness of oneself as being black; consciousness of oneself as an embodied subjectivity or being in a world that is colour conscious. This means that in an anti-black world, the consciousness of a black person is an awareness of self as being racially different from the bodily being of other persons. Thus the questions animating Black Consciousness are indicative of the problems of the black self and are questions infused with ontological and teleological significance and ultimately involve two essential concerns, namely, identity and liberation.

Biko's constant description of the Black Consciousness philosophy as a 'coming to consciousness' does not merely echo Césaire's thoughts but also points to Black Consciousness's phenomenological understanding of black people's desire to construct their own identity and take full responsibility for their own liberation. From an identity point of view, Black Consciousness means (1) black people's consciousness or realisation that the world is infested with an anti-black social reality and (2) black people's recognition of themselves as black and proud of the fact. From a liberation perspective, Black Consciousness meant black people's intense desire to annihilate this social reality, and to move towards the creation of a new reality, a fair social reality as a condition for universal humanism. Thus the two motifs of Black Consciousness find their expression in the tenets of Africana

existential philosophy. Africana existential philosophers, therefore, deal with issues of the emergence of black selfhood, suffering, embodied agency, freedom, slavery, racism and liberation; in short, they deal with the question of being-black-in-the-world. It is these questions of 'problematic existence and suffering', Gordon points out, that 'animate the theoretical dimensions of black intellectual existential production' (2000: 8).

As the name suggests, Africana existential philosophy, indeed Africana philosophy as well, is not limited only to black people. It also includes the work of those who are neither African nor African-descended but 'who recognize the legitimacy and importance of the issues and endeavors that constitute the philosophizing of persons African or African-descended and who contribute to discussions of their efforts, persons whose work justifies their being called "Africanist"' (Outlaw 1996: 76). An Africanist thinker of the sort Outlaw speaks about, is exemplified by, among others, the French existentialist philosopher Sartre, who emerges as a catalyst to the Africana philosophy tradition.

Very few people are aware of Sartre's involvement with and contribution to the South African anti-apartheid struggle. Participating at a conference of the French Liaison Committee against Apartheid in 1966, he declared: 'Those who are confronting apartheid should know they are not alone' (1966). It is this kind of commitment to freedom and his numerous texts on colonialism, racism and anti-Semitism that had a considerable impact on those South Africans whose lives were directly and greatly affected by apartheid oppression and racism. Sartre's philosophy thus became a source of personal, philosophical and political inspiration for South African thinkers such as Biko, Noel Chabani Manganyi, Mafika Gwala and Barney Pityana, amongst others. As Mandla Langa, in an interview given to Lindy Wilson states: 'We read the existential philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre' (Wilson 2011: 46-7). As Sam Nolutshungu observed about BCM, there was an evident 'interest in existentialism, phenomenology, and philosophical psychology . . . a philosophical preoccupation with "being", with explicit citation of Sartre' (1983: 156-7). Pityana states that Biko 'laid his hands on some philosophical writings like Jean-Paul Sartre and made ready use of them' (2002). Alluding to Sartre's concept of freedom and its implications for speaking out without fear, Biko notes: 'There is no freedom in silence, Sartre discovered this to his dismay' (1972b: 10). Indeed, Biko's characterisation of Black Consciousness

in Hegelian terms distinctly and deliberately recalls Sartre's essay, 'Black Orpheus', in which Negritude is described as an antithesis, the weak upbeat of a dialectical progression, a negative moment responding to the thesis, white racism; in short an 'antiracist racism' (Sartre 1988: 296).

Sartre's phenomenological account of freedom *qua* the fundamental characteristic of the condition of being human, the centrality of the concept of consciousness and its incompleteness, his emphasis on existing authentically in an oppressive racist situation rather than being in bad faith, his belief that we are nothing else but the sum of our actions, immediately appealed to and made his thoughts attractive to those whose existence and humanity are either denied or called into question. We should be careful, however, not to assume that black existential philosophy is fundamentally a Sartrean phenomenon. Sartre merely stands as an uncommon catalyst in black philosophy of existence since Africana people, by virtue of the racialised existential condition, already had reasons to raise existential questions of liberation and of identity (Gordon 2000). The choice of Sartre's philosophy, therefore, is already existentially situated.

Black Consciousness's philosophical grounding, particularly as a concern for the ontological concept of being, existentialist categories of freedom, bad faith, consciousness, embodied consciousness, death, fear, anguish or dread, besides appearing as various articles in the *SASO Newsletters*, was first systematically articulated by Manganyi – a leading Black Consciousness theorist of the time. Although Manganyi brings forth a mixture of Sartre's existential phenomenology, Martin Heidegger's ontology, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body, Viktor Frankl's logotherapy and Fanon's phenomenology of blackness, his work is more slanted towards Sartre and Fanon. Considering himself as having been influenced by 'a philosophical orientation which may be described as existential-phenomenological' (Manganyi 1977: 8), the text that appears to have had the most impact on his thinking is Sartre's *Portrait of the Anti-Semite*. Indeed, a quick look at the titles of Manganyi's texts indicates a Sartrean influence. For example, the title of his first book, *Being-Black-in-the-World* (1973), reminds anyone with knowledge of the existential phenomenology of Heidegger's and Sartre's category of 'being-in-the-world'. His subsequent text, *Looking Through the Keyhole* (1981) clearly recalls Sartre's famous example of a man who, driven by intense jealousy,

is caught peeping through the keyhole in the famous section of *Being and Nothingness*: 'The Look'. One other text, *Alienation and the Body in Racist Society* (1977), also contains chapter titles with existentialist flavour such as: 'Us and Them', 'Nausea', 'The Body-for-Others', 'Alienation: The Body and Racism' and 'The Body-World and the Ontogenesis of Racism'. Blackness, Manganyi thinks, is a way of being, a mode of existence in an anti-black world ruptured by alienation, hate and above all, dehumanisation.

An overview of the articles appearing in the *SASO Newsletters* also reveals a definite and determined concern with 'being'. In characteristically existentialist language, Themba Sono, the ousted third president of SASO, wrote: 'The Black man is Negritude because . . . he cannot hate his being without ceasing to be. Being cannot be non-Being, Black cannot be Non-White' (Sono 1971: 18). The reference to Negritude, both the Senghor and Césaire variants, indicates how the concern with being was not only a philosophical preoccupation of Black Consciousness but also its political and cultural dimension. The poetry of Black Consciousness exponents, especially the *SASO Newsletter*, *Staffrider* and *New Classic* contributors – Gwala, Mongane Wally Serote, Oswald Mtshali, Don Mattera, Siphso Sepamla, Mbulelo Mzamane – replete with references to black being and humanity, bear witness to this concern.

### The Caribbean

Sartre's influence on Black Consciousness adherents was mediated not only by his struggles against colonialism and racism but also by his close connection to the Negritude movement and Fanon. Besides his famous text on anti-Semitism, Sartre's 'Black Orpheus' (*Orphée noir*) written in 1948 as an introduction to Senghor's *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* – a collection of poems by blacks articulating the tenets of the Negritude movement's philosophy – became a major source of BCM's ideas. As V-Y Mudimbe attests, 'Black Orpheus' 'transformed negritude into a major political and philosophical criticism of colonialism' (1988: 83). We noted earlier that Césaire and the Negritude movement appropriated a negative term and transformed it into a positive one. Césaire's significance to the thinking of Biko and BCM was not only the transformation of blackness from negative into positive signification, but also the role he played as a teacher and inspiration to Fanon.

We noted that most Black Consciousness exponents acknowledged their immense intellectual debt to Fanon, the Martiniquean revolutionary psychiatrist and philosopher who authored two of the most widely read books by black people all over the world: *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968). Fanon's insertion into South Africa came through these famous texts, which became the Bibles and the guiding lights of the student movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. In both these texts, Fanon repeatedly makes direct and indirect reference to South Africa, which in his view, as Ato Sekyi-Otu points out, is 'an emblematic instance . . . of the colonial condition' (1996: 2), and in his own words, an embodiment of the colonial system's 'geographical layout' (Fanon 1968: 37) with its system of compartments and the 'dividing line' (38) that constructs human existence into racial collectives within a 'motionless Manicheistic world' (51). In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon describes South Africa's apartheid as an archetype of the division of human experience:

The colonial world is a world divided into compartments. It is probably unnecessary to recall the existence of native quarters and European quarters, of schools for natives and schools for Europeans; in the same way we need not recall apartheid in South Africa . . . This world divided into compartments, this world cut in two is inhabited by two different species. The originality of the colonial context is that economic reality, inequality and *the immense difference of ways of life* never come to mask the human realities (1968: 39–40).

In this anti-black world order, this 'racial polity', to use Charles Mills's phrase, 'what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a given species' (Fanon 1968: 37, 39). In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon asks: 'What is South Africa? A boiler into which thirteen million blacks are clubbed and penned in by two million whites. If the poor whites hate the Negroes . . . it is because the structure of South Africa is a racist structure' (1967: 87).

Readers minimally acquainted with South African apartheid realities and confronted with the above extracts from Fanon's work, will certainly understand why these texts packed such irresistible attraction and

influence on the radical young students of the 1960s and 1970s. His work spoke directly to the existential situation of black people by articulating their misery, despair, anxiety, anguish and desires under apartheid while at the same time keeping the light of hope alive. As Lou Turner and John Alan say in their book whose title, *Frantz Fanon, Soweto and American Black Thought*, clearly indicates the connection between Fanon and the South African struggle:

It is not accidental that Fanon's thoughts are relevant to the liberation struggles in South Africa, as manifested in the Black Consciousness Movement . . . It was Fanon who had . . . deepened the Hegelian concept of self-consciousness and in his sharp *critique* of 'reciprocity', denied that there is any reciprocity when the relationship of Master and Slave has the additive of color (1986: 38).

It was also no accident that Fanon became the catalyst behind the thought of South African black existentialists, especially Biko and Manganyi. For it is through this Fanonian philosophy and its emphasis on black identity and liberation that the Black Consciousness philosophy became embedded into the collective consciousness of the black masses that ultimately contributed in bringing the apartheid regime to its knees. The attraction of Fanon is that he wrote as a black man at the pre-reflective level about anti-black racism. As a result, there exists a concrete knowledge of the black situation and an accompanying depth of passion in Fanon that could not have escaped the probing eyes and attentive ears of Biko, Manganyi, Gwala, Pityana and the other activists of BCM in South Africa. Indeed, Biko's book (1996) is full of citations from Fanon even though he often does not mention Fanon's name explicitly because of the draconian apartheid publications laws. The chapter titles in that text directly echo Fanon, for example, 'Black Souls in White Mask', or 'Black Consciousness and the Quest for Humanity'.

### **The Americas**

There is a general consensus that BCM in South Africa owes a great debt to the theories and political practices of the Black Power movement in the United States. Correct as this interpretation is, it is however a half truth. Indeed it is incorrect to claim, as Sono does, that 'Black Consciousness as

it is known and articulated in South Africa . . . is lock stock and barrel a black American invention, exported to the South African black radicals almost *verbatim*' (1993: 34), that Black Consciousness here is 'a Black American proposition' (55) and that the South African version of Black Consciousness 'as an *ideological* weapon, as a political *doctrine*, is a thinly veiled Afro-American weapon with all its faults – warts and all' (40; original emphasis). In a recent publication, Daniel R. Magaziner makes almost the same accusations as Sono. In support of Sono and his co-accusers, Magaziner writes: '*They had a point. As with Biko's use of Kaunda, SASO activists did not exactly respect copyright*' (2010: 48; emphasis added). He continues on the following page: 'Just as I will show how Black Consciousness's faith-infused politics rejected the narrow structures of "rational" political practice, *so too might we argue that activists' use of text appropriately violated modernist, legalistic notions of intellectual property and propriety*' (49; emphasis added).

It is indeed common knowledge that the Black Consciousness militants read and were influenced by Stokely Carmichael's and Charles Hamilton's *Black Power and the Politics of Liberation in America* (1967), Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968), George Jackson's *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (1970) and *Blood in My Eye* (1972), Malcolm X's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) and *By Any Means Necessary* (1970), Angela Davis's *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance* (1971), James Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969), and even African American soul music as typified by James Brown's popular song: 'Say it loud – I'm black and I'm proud'. Most members of SASO and those of BCM acknowledge their debt to the Black Power movement of the United States. However, it is totally disingenuous to exaggerate the African American tradition in the manner in which Sono and Magaziner do, to the almost total neglect of other influences. Even though we acknowledge the impact of Black Power on Black Consciousness, Biko, however, insisted that those Black Power ideas were not just simply absorbed and appropriated with disregard for the different context of the existential, social and political peculiarities of South Africa as distinct from the United States of America. As Robert Fatton notes: 'The Black South African intelligentsia discovered in Black Power ideology the basis for generating a new theoretical paradigm, but one which had to be adapted and reconciled with its own peculiar social condition' (1986: 75). Writing in the *SASO Newsletter*, Bheki Langa argues:

'Black Consciousness is not an alien ideology that needs to be forced on the people, but it is borne out of the existential situation of the Black man [*sic*] oppressed in his own land. This means that the people have got the ideas latent in them' (1975: 12). In an apparent rebuttal of the Sono thesis Biko responds:

The growth of awareness among South African blacks has often been ascribed to influence from the American 'Negro' movement [Black Power movement]. Yet it seems to me that this is a sequel to the attainment of independence by so many African states within so short a time . . . The fact that American terminology has often been used to express our thoughts is merely because all new ideas seem to get extensive publicity in the United States (1996: 69).

According to George Fredrickson a close examination of the circumstances of the development and the contents of Black Consciousness ideology reveals that the local conditions and indigenous thought in South Africa had much more influence on Black Consciousness than the American influence. The reading of Black Power literature was, according to Fredrickson, 'clearly a stimulus, but the adoption of African-American concepts and slogans, was selective rather than wholesale, and the ideas that were appropriated were often reinterpreted to fit South African conditions' (1995: 298). Neville Alexander, a fierce critic of Black Consciousness, acknowledged that he 'discovered that some of the more famous ideas and passages in the writings of some of the Black Consciousness publicists were drawn directly or indirectly from PAC [Pan Africanist Congress], ANC [African National Congress], and NEUM [Non-European Unity Movement] sources. Only very few of the more fashionable ideas ("Black is Beautiful") can be traced back to their US origins' (in Pityana et al. 1991: 239).

There are two other rarely acknowledged thinkers whose influence on BCM is unmistakable, namely, Du Bois and the Brazilian, Paulo Freire. Several key ideas of BCM have their genealogy from the ideas of Du Bois. The initial volumes of *SASO Newsletter* contained citations from and reference to Du Bois's classic book, *The Souls of Black Folk*. In an article entitled 'The Politics of Powerlessness', Pityana cites Du Bois's most famous statement: 'The problem of the 20th century is the problem of the colour-line, the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Africa and

Asia, to America and the islands of the sea' (1970: 8). Indeed, what better statement could capture and articulate the apartheid situation.

The first chapter of Du Bois's book poses the question: 'How does it feel to be a problem?' In a world in which black existence is thought of and treated as a problematic existence, blacks, according to Du Bois, develop a sense not only of 'no true self consciousness' but also a 'double consciousness' a feeling of 'twoness – an American, a Negro; two warring ideals in one dark body' (1982: 45). Besides the existentialist implications of double consciousness *qua* being-for-others and seeing oneself through the eyes of the Other, it also resonated well with Being-Black-in-South Africa. In other words, being born a South African but not being a citizen by virtue of being black. This double consciousness generates what Du Bois describes as 'a painful self-consciousness'. Double consciousness resonated with what Biko calls a 'two-faced attitude of the black man to this whole question of existence' in South Africa (1996: 103).

From Freire's *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the ever-revolutionary notion of 'education for liberation' and the transformative concept of 'conscientisation' were adopted by BCM. Freire's pedagogical method proved helpful in SASO's formation schools and were later appropriated by members of Black Community Programme. For Freire, *conscientização* means 'learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality' (1985: 19). Put differently, conscientisation for Freire refers to an awakening critical consciousness. At the trial of his comrades in 1976, Biko confirmed the following definition of the concept: 'Conscientization is a process whereby individuals or groups living within a given social and political setting are made aware of their situation . . . Thus then conscientization implies a desire to engage people in an emancipatory process, in an attempt to free them from a situation of bondage' (Woods 1987: 188–9). In an interview by Gail M. Gerhart, Biko explains the process of conscientisation as 'basically a raising of the level of critical awareness of what is going on around town. And it promotes self-reliance in the area of making decisions for yourself, looking at things and analysing them' (1972a: 30). In Fanon's view, a new consciousness among the oppressed is forged through the process of conscientisation or what he calls 'educating the masses'. Thus, the 'ability to assess and improve their own influence over themselves and their environment', as Donald Woods points out above, requires what in Sartre's

terms is a 'radical conversion'. That Freire's *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is clearly rooted in Fanon's and Sartre's philosophies of liberation further illustrates their existentialist legacy to BCM.

### The Africans

It is surprising, therefore, that Sono downplays the African connection as a contributor to Black Consciousness. The notion of African consciousness, for example, precedes the notion of Black Consciousness as articulated by the black American. Influential individuals in the movement itself – individuals who steered the course of the movement – were also profoundly influenced by African liberation traditions, African political thinkers and activists. BCM proponents were great admirers of African intellectual and political elites such as Sobukwe, Kamuzu Banda, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, Nkrumah, Kaunda and, of course, Nyerere. Nyerere occupies a special place in the development of Black Consciousness. His definition of African socialism as 'an attitude of mind' and 'a way of life' in his *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism* (1968) became the defining slogan of Black Consciousness as a philosophy, the political essence of which is communalism and self-reliance. In an article entitled 'Priorities in Community Development', Pityana, citing Nyerere's Arusha Declaration on self-reliance, writes: 'The message is simple, BLACK MAN YOU ARE ON YOUR OWN. Like Nyerere we must minimise reliance on external aid' (1971: 14; original capitals).

The concepts of 'African humanism' and communalism as expressed in the works of Nkrumah, Nyerere and Kaunda had a great impact on the thought of most BCM members. In his text *A Humanist in Africa*, for example, Kaunda articulates the African's belief in the possibilities of 'Man'. He writes: 'To a certain extent, we in Africa have always had a gift for enjoying Man for himself' (1966: 22). In almost the same words, Biko reiterates this belief when he claims that Africans 'believe in the inherent goodness of man. Ours has always been a Man-centred society' (1996: 41). Because of this outlook, apartheid has always been viewed as an anti-humanism whose fundamental project was the denial of the humanity of black people.

The very essence of Black Consciousness philosophy and the intellectual traditions from which it benefited, gravitated toward socialism as the ultimate source of political aspiration. Beginning with Sartrean existentialism, for Du

Bois, Césaire, Senghor, Fanon (all existentialists of some kind) and Nyerere the vision was socialism albeit each with his own brand of socialism. It is thus no accident that most BCM militants embraced socialism as a political vision informing their theory and practice. Indeed, in *Search for a Method*, and *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, no less in ‘Anti-Semite and Jew’ and ‘Black Orpheus’, Sartre sought the ultimate dissolution of existentialism into Marxism. Existentialism, just as much as Marxism, Sartre argued, addressed itself to lived-experience in order to discover concrete syntheses. Positing, in a Hegelian dialectic, white racism as the thesis and Black Consciousness as the antithesis, Biko’s synthesis was a society in which race played no part and where there is no exploitation and the distribution of the wealth of the nation is equitable. While many BCM militants, particularly Biko, believed in African socialism and African communalism as articulated by Nyerere and Senghor, others like Gwala, preferred scientific socialism with its emphasis on class antagonisms. However, Biko argues: ‘The Black Consciousness movement does not want to accept the dilemma of capitalism versus communism. It opts for a socialist solution that is an authentic expression of black communalism’ (in Woods 1987: 122).

Finally, in response to a question about influential traditions, Biko answered: ‘The influence from Africa . . . was *very* important at that time . . . We were receptive to other influences, strange enough, influences much more from Africa, guys who could speak for themselves’ (Gerhart 1972: 11). However, it is very difficult to find reference made in the writings of SASO and BCM to influences from within South Africa. Part of the reason for this silence is that most black radical South African literature or personalities considered subversive by the apartheid regime were banned and thus could not be quoted. This, however, should not be understood as complete absence of such intellectual and cultural influences. For example, what was called ‘protest literature’ or ‘protest poetry’ of the Black Consciousness writers and poets such as Serote, Mzamane, Gwala and Njabulo Ndebele, not only indicates the influence of indigenous oral traditions but also the tremendous influence of the work of the *Drum* magazine writers such as Es’kia Mphahlele, Casey Motsisi, Can Themba, Nat Nakasa, Lewis Nkosi, Bloke Modisane and Peter Abrahams, amongst others. I have argued elsewhere (2008) that the near absence of an explicitly home-grown philosophical tradition in South Africa is precisely because

black philosophy has mainly been an inter-textually embedded discursive practice. Because of this inter-textuality, black philosophy became an open but diverse discursive field in which ontological, epistemological, ethical, social, political and even existentialist traditions emerged. These traditions, defined by the peculiarities and actualities of the South African lived experiences, have been fashioned and sustained in novels, the literature of the 1940s and 1950s, autobiographies and the poetry of many black writers.

Ideologically, BCM was a conglomerate of various political allegiances. Some members of SASO, for example Ben Ngubane, were sympathetic to the ANC's multi-racialism while other such as Nchaupe Mokoape had strong PAC leanings. A close reading of Biko indicates SASO's opposition to the ANC's policies as expressed in the 1955 Freedom Charter. Against the Charter's insistence that 'South Africa belongs to all who live in it', the SASO Resolution 45 states: 'Therefore we wish explicitly to state that this country belongs to black people and to them alone' (Biko 1996: 121). Explaining this resolution, Biko says: 'This country is essentially a country in Africa, a continent which is inhabited always naturally by black people, and that whites – it is conceived that whites are here and that they may live in the country, or they may leave the country, depending on their relationship with blacks' (122). This declaration is a familiar echo of the PAC's slogan: 'Africa for Africans'. Despite this disagreement, some members of the ANC exercised tremendous influence on the philosophical outlook of Black Consciousness. A case in point is the first ANC Youth League president, Anton Lembede, whose Africanist views were later to be expressed by the PAC and subsequently filtered into Black Consciousness's philosophy. Incidentally Lembede had written his MA thesis on Hegel's theory of religion, a philosopher who, according to Pityana's account, was also 'a very influential philosopher and sparring partner for those of us who were seeking answers, and out of which even more questions were raised' (2012: 5).

Since Biko grew up among the PAC members in his family, the influence of Sobukwe cannot be a far-fetched assumption. Sobukwe's challenge of the unquestioned domination of white liberals in shaping the struggle of black people within the liberation movements in South Africa, an issue that dominated BCM's attitude towards liberal whites, is one example of his influence on the movement. Sobukwe's position against white liberals shifted and located the responsibility for the struggle against oppression and

racism squarely on the shoulders of black people themselves. Black people, Sobukwe insisted, could no longer stand as powerless victims and watch a game they should be playing on the touch-line. He insisted that black people be at the forefront of the liberation struggle on their own terms and that if 'we want to build a new Africa, only we can build it'; a statement that perfectly resonates with Black Consciousness's war cry: 'Black man, you are on your own.' Indeed, some of the basic philosophical views of BCM resonate with those of the PAC. For example, the opposition to collaboration with whites, especially white liberals for their interventionist, patronising and paternalistic practices and behaviour resonates with Sobukwe's political philosophy.

### **Black theology and Black Consciousness**

Finally, one of the primary sources of Black Consciousness's theoretical and political work has been the black theology of liberation developed by James Cone in the United States. Black Consciousness leaders realised that given the evil nature of apartheid and its grounding on religious precepts, the masses of black people began to question the legitimacy of God's love, power, omniscience, omnipotence and goodness. The challenge became a theodicy issue: 'If God loves all His children equally, how come Whites oppress Blacks and God does nothing about it?' The title of William Jones's text '*Is God a White Racist?*' speaks to this theodician problematic. Cone, the architect of black theology of liberation, uses existentialist tenets (especially those propounded by Sartre, Albert Camus, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, even Soren Kierkegaard) to develop his theory in his influential texts, *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969), *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970) and *God of the Oppressed* (1975). Cone's contention that contrary to the hermeneutics of orthodox Christianity concerning God's purpose, black theology of liberation views God as fundamentally on the side of the oppressed, a God who identifies with the sufferings of black people and that this God is thus the God of revolution, became a response to the theodician problematic in South Africa. And this led to the emergence of black theology within BCM, advocated by theological scholars and thinkers such as Basil Moore, Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak, Bonginjalo Goba, Mokgethi Motlhabi, Itumeleng Mosala, Takatso Mofokeng, Sabelo Ntwasa, Manas Buthelezi and others. Black theology of liberation, Cone proclaims, represents a community of black people who refuse to co-operate in the

valorisation of whiteness. His influence is immediately evident in Biko's views on white liberals as 'do-gooders', his rebelliousness against oppression and his call for a black theology of liberation in South Africa.

### Conclusion

I have attempted to show, in particular, the philosophical foundations, and also to a lesser degree the political influences of BCM. In other words, I have claimed that there has been some continuity of ideas from Delany, Douglass, Du Bois, Garvey, Cooper, Negritude, Pan Africanism, African socialism, existentialism, phenomenology, Black Power, black theology, and so on. This, however, does not mean that there was nothing original in BCM. On the contrary, the borrowings from these other traditions were not just simply a transposition of ideas and concepts but a reworking and reconstruction of ideas, which, because of the peculiar circumstances and conditions of the South African context, resulted in the emergence of unique and original discursive articulations. Given the circumstance and conditions of its emergence, there is therefore no doubt that the Black Consciousness philosophy in its literary, artistic, political, religious, social and cultural manifestations is, to use Leonard Harris's famous phrase, 'Philosophy Born of Struggle'.

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### Notes

1. For a detailed political and historical account of the Black Consciousness Movement, see among others, Buthelezi (1987); Pityana et al. (1991); Mangena (1989); Gerhart (1972); Fatton (1986); Halisi (1999); Ranuga (1986); Gibson (1988); Sono (1993); Maimela (1999).
2. See, for example, More (2008, 2010/2011); Outlaw (1996); Gordon (2000, 2008); Henry (2000).
3. For black philosophy of existence, see, for example, Gordon (1997); Fanon (1967); Manganyi (1973, 1977).

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