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The unfinished business: A decolonial reflection on the *State of Emergency* song by Simphiwe Dana

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Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* critically examines colonialism, highlighting its violence, exploitation and dehumanisation. He argues that colonialism creates a stark division between the privileged colonisers and the marginalised colonised, leading to what he terms 'atmospheric violence,' which results in anxiety, depression and feelings of inferiority among the oppressed. True liberation, for Fanon, requires a radical break from this oppressive framework. Similarly, Black theology critiques the role of Western Christianity in sustaining colonial and systemic oppression, advocating for liberation rooted in the experiences of marginalised communities. The song *State of Emergency* by Simphiwe Dana reflects these themes, addressing the ongoing struggles of Black South Africans even after political liberation, and calling on younger generations to engage with the incomplete liberation project inspired by the 1976 youth uprising.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This study employs critical discourse analysis to examine themes of marginalisation and the quest for liberation in both Fanon's work and Dana's music, demonstrating how language reflects and sustains power dynamics. Critical discourse analysis aligns with decolonial thought, emphasising that genuine liberation requires addressing systemic inequities and restoring dignity to marginalised communities. Both Fanon and Dana assert that emancipation involves dismantling entrenched power structures beyond political change.

Keywords: negotiated settlement; liberation; decoloniality; justice; redress; reparation; marginalisation; systemic exclusion.

Introduction

Contextualising the cartographies of struggles

In this study, we engaged in a demarcation and delimitation process, challenging established principles about history and modernity. This critical step is essential for enabling the decolonisation of being, thinking and knowledge – a central theme and objective that connects diverse local histories while striving towards the open utopia envisioned by the global decolonial movement. This argument adopts border thinking, which involves rejecting the detached stance of modern epistemology and instead situating the thinker as an active, embodied participant in the processes under examination. This perspective underscores the imperative of 'learning to unlearn' – a deliberate effort to dismantle ingrained thought patterns imposed by education, culture and societal norms shaped by Western imperial reasoning.

A *State of Emergency* refers to actions taken by a government to implement policies aimed at protecting the security of citizens and, ultimately, the state itself (Riekmann & Wydra 2013). However, Bjørnskov and Voigt (2018) argue that state bureaucracies have been used to enforce a *State of Emergency* in response to civil unrest caused by liberation movements. On 20 July 1985, then-President PW Botha implemented a *State of Emergency* in South Africa in response to the protests that were led by anti-Apartheid movements at the time (Lund 2003). While spatial domination was enforced through laws that ensured that whites and non-whites lived separate lives, the *State of Emergency* was implemented to ensure that the Apartheid-led government minimised the possibilities of being overthrown by a revolution (Henrico & Ficks 2019). Essentially, the Apartheid government implemented the *State of Emergency* to ensure that the living conditions critically mentioned by Fanon (1961) remained in a perpetual state of existence.

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Mills (1997) makes the following observation: 'White supremacy is the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today' (p. 1). The conditions of black South Africans ought to be contextualised within the colonial political system. Mills' categorisation of white supremacy as an unnamed political system, decolonial and Africana critical theorists have located and named it as the 'colonial matrix of power'. Mignolo's definition of the system becomes imperative in identifying the matrix. He (Mgnolo 2007) tersely states that:

> Colonial matrix of power has been described in four interrelated domains: control of economy [*land appropriation, exploitation of labour, control of natural resources*]; control of authority [*institution, army*]; control of gender and sexuality [*family, education*]; and control of subjectivity and knowledge [*epistemology, education and formation of subjectivity*]. (p. 156)

It is within the matrix of power that blackness is rendered and thingified as absent and invisible. While whiteness is ever present, in other words, the presence of whiteness functions as a technology of the embodiment of full presence, the 'prosthetic gods' (Wilderson III 2008:98). The notion of absence and presence can be summed up in what Birt (2004:56) refers to as *Being* and *Nothingness*. While Gordon (1995:6) surmises whiteness and/or presence as bad faith can be 'shown to be an effort to deny the blackness within by way of asserting the supremacy of Whiteness'. The cartographies of struggle, as Soja (2010:1) reminds us, is that historical '(in) justice has a consequential geography'. The geographies of struggle in relation to the black existential experiences also involve geographies of (in)justice that are not physical or conditioned by political boundaries. Succinctly posited, the notion of (in)justice emphasises the systemic inequalities, discrimination, economic disparities and social bias in an assumed 'just' society. The presence of injustice underscores the ongoing need for vigilance, critique and reform to bridge the gaps between ideals and reality. Decolonial analysis reveals that assumed just societies often perpetuate colonial violence through invisibilised power structures. Combined with Black theology's moral urgency, it demands not only dismantling oppressive systems but reconstructing justice through the epistemologies, spiritualities and lifeways of those colonialism sought to erase. These conditions are articulated by Fanon (1961) in the following manner:

> This compartmentalized world, this world divided in two, it is inhabited by different species. The singularity of the colonial context lies in the fact that economic reality, inequality, and enormous disparities in lifestyles never manage to mask the human reality. (p. 5)

In Fanonian terms, the 'zone of nonbeing' is a space occupied by the colonised, a disreputable space occupied by disreputable people. A cartography of struggle characterised by hunger and dislocation within a racialised social hierarchy. It is a spatiality of consistent war and violence under the gaze of militarisation and policing. Succinctly put, the space that the wretched occupy has to be analysed within the matrix of power, which privileges whiteness to gaze over black bodies. As Birt (2004:55) reminds us, 'our concern is with a structure of values, a worldview and way of life. Whiteness is a chosen (although socially conditioned) way of being-in-the world'. The being-in-the-world of whiteness vis-á-vis the 'nonbeing-in-the-world' of blackness is based on the self-deception of the inauthenticity of the dominant race, informed by the concept of parasitic identity. Birt (2004) further remarks:

> To embrace whiteness is to embrace the bad faith of privilege. Whiteness is the privilege of exclusive transcendence. But it can live as such only through the denial of the transcendence of an Other, the reduction of that Other to an object, to pure facticity … Other has been primarily the black. Whiteness could not exist without that Other. Whiteness is a parasitic identity. (p. 58)

Following the argument by Birt, it can be argued that whiteness within the 'zone-being' cannot exist without the 'zone nonbeing'. Thus, the 'Other' within the colonial matrix is denied transcendence; instead, the condition of the 'Other' is a space of the objectified subjectification. It is within this space that the parasitic identity of whiteness functions as bad faith privilege. The intersectionality of colonisation, racial objectification based on the idea of whiteness as a form of beingness, is elucidated by Cesáire (2000) in the following:

> Between colonizer and colonized there is room only for forced labor, intimidation, pressure, the police, taxation, theft, rape, compulsory crops, contempt, mistrust, arrogance, self-complacency, swinishness, brainless elites, degraded masses. No human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production. My turn to state an equation: colonization = 'thingification' (p. 42)

The equation by Cesáire illustrates the notion of whiteness as a parasitic identity performed within the intersectionality of space, race and place. Which are informed and constituted transactionally based on the notion of dominance and subjugation. Such space, therefore, is racialised and objectified, in which the 'Other' becomes raced through their lived spatiality (Sullivan 2006:143), like many other songs that were composed across the continent and Americas with the aim to speak to the marginalised wretched. This is because such songs invoked and continue to name, reflect and label the continual spaces of exploitation, disenfranchisement of the black body. Thus, such music is performed within the spatiality of justice as an integral and formative ingredient of justice itself, a vital part of how justice and injustice are socially constructed and develop over time.

It can be argued that the objectification, subjugation and subjectification of the Other is an instrument of production influenced by the socio-economic geographies of a racialised space. Spatiality as a technology of racial division cartographies of struggles, poverty, disenfranchisement and economic exclusion contributes 'to the racial and sexist division of a civilised ''we" from a wild "them"', and that systems of white domination, respectively, tend to allow and constrain white and non-white people to live their spatiality in divergent ways (Sullivan 2006:143).

The songs such as *Apartheid* by Peter Tosh and Stevie Wonder, and *War* by Bob Marley, among others, functioned as a

technology of mobilisation and resistance to white domination. Such mobilisation is performed as a technology of resistance, shaped by the notion of spatiality that is occupied by the colonial subjects within the colony. These songs, like Africana critical analysts Senghor, Fanon, Du Bois, Sankara, Cesáire and Cabral (2016:10), engage in these songs in a discourse on cultural imperialism, cultural racism, religious racism, racial violence and racial colonisation, which are operated as technologies of power within the colonial matrix.

Soja's (2010:1) observation becomes crucial in delineating the consequences of geographical injustice, which involve not only geographies of physical and political boundaries but also entail the geographical mappings of ideas, images and normative structures. Borrowing from Yancy's (2004:108) concept of positionality, the geographical injustices function as a form of positionality that has to be analysed from how whiteness is performed as a universal value code. The phenomenon of space becomes a lens through which an analysis of the song *State of Emergency* by Simphiwe Dana should be located. The notion of 'state' signifies a geographical space and the matrix of power that functions as a form of gaze on the subjects. The subjects, in this case, are those that the (colonial) 'state' categorises as inferior (essentially, the 'nonbeing'). Thus, the *State of Emergency* song not only engages with the notions of whiteness and the privileges that are associated with it, but also critiques the normalisation of racialised spatiality. Mignolo (2007) reminds us that:

> The emergence of 'modern nation-states' in Europe, means two things: that the state became the new central authority of imperial/colonial domination and that the 'nation' in Europe was mainly constituted of one ethnicity, articulated as 'whiteness' Mignolo. (p. 157)

To understand the systemic marginalisation of blackness in South Africa, as expressed and articulated by Simphiwe Dana in her song titled *State of Emergency*, it is imperative to provide a contextual background of the role of music during the anti-Apartheid struggle and the so-called 'post-Apartheid' conditions. Schumann (2008) states that music played a central role in conscientising the minds of people against a system whose oppressive structures are still prevalent in post-1994 South Africa. This view closely lends to that of Clarke (2014), who argues that censorship of politically inclined music during Apartheid was aimed at ensuring that people do not rise towards an emancipative state that would challenge the status quo. Essentially, the 'status quo' refers to the existence of perpetual violence, racial spatiality, religious racism and racial colonialism – critical concepts that were used to mobilise the masses, by the likes of Peter Tosh, Bob Marley and Stevie Wonder. Birt (2004:59) argues that, 'Thus, transcendence becomes the property of whites, while blacks suffer the misfortune of being situated in a what mode of being. They who are always white'. In other words, the value of whiteness fundamentally depends on the degradation of blackness, the bio-politicisation of the black body. Whiteness without the 'Other' has no value. Differently put, the cartographies (theatre) of struggles within the zone of nonbeing function as the production and sustenance of white privilege. The imagery of theatre as a space of objectification, subjectification and resistance to white dominance becomes essential in identifying the performance of power within the colonial matrix. Music, therefore, as a form of resistance and a technology of power problematises the power of whiteness and structuralised racism that finds impetus in the thingification of black bodies.

Accordingly, it becomes of much importance to analyse Simphiwe Dana's posture on what she regards to be a *State of Emergency*, through intersectional lenses, namely: Africana critical thought and decolonial thought. These lenses, in this article, are applied as tools within a toolbox. They function as frames of reference in analysing the objectification of black bodies through whiteness as a form of parasitic identity. The intention of this article is to apply two theoretical lenses in analysing the '*State of Emergency*' by Simphiwe Dana within the apparatus of the colonial matrix of power. Understanding how coloniality as a technology of surveillance, South Africa continues to be entangled and assimilated into the colonial apparatus of the Empire. Applying both Africana critical thought and decolonial thought to amplify the conditions of black bodies within a racialised space, the work of Dana, *State of Emergency*, zooms into the ever-persistence of white privilege within a stratified society.

In her seminar work, Vice (2010) argues that the maintenance of a racialised society in South Africa post-1994 is to analyse such a context, in a multifaceted approach, for the purposes of identifying various institutional machinery that has created a fertile ground upon which white privilege can be maintained and manifested. Thus, a critical question she raises: How do I live in this strange place, become essential in identifying the instrumentalisation and institutionalisation of a sanctioned state that privileges whiteness? As stated in the discussion, that justice and injustice are socially constructed over time, white privilege can equally be viewed as a social construction. Essentially, the existence of white privilege in South Africa extends itself from the very self-deception of the inauthenticity of the dominant race, informed by beingness located with the zone-being.

It is thus essential to provide a premise on the role of music and its ability to raise consciousness among the wretched (the colonial subjects located in the zone of nonbeing). It then becomes equally important to trace how music was censored during the Apartheid years, and how the state weaponised its apparatuses to survey and subjugate the intellectuality of the colonial subject.

Music as a technology of challenging the geo and body politics: The censorship of music

This study would be remiss not to highlight the profound contributions of Amiri Baraka's *Black Music* (1967), Phyl Garland's *The Sound of Soul* (1969), Frank Kofsky's *Black*

Nationalism and the Revolution in Music (1970), Rickey Vincent's *Funk: The Music, the People, and the Rhythm of the One* (1996), Robert Bowman's *Soulsville, U.S.A.: The Story of Stax Records* (1997), Mark Anthony Neal's *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and black Public Culture* (1998), Brian Ward's *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm & Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (1998), Scott Saul's *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (2003), George Lewis' *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (2008), Patrick Thomas' *Listen Whitey!: The Sounds of Black Power, 1965–1975* (2012) and Rickey Vincent's *Party Music: The Inside Story of the Black Panthers' Band and How Black Power Transformed Music* (2013). These works collectively illuminate the intersections of black music, politics and culture, offering critical insights into how music has served as both a reflection and a catalyst for black liberation movements.

Rabaka (2022), in his book *Black Power Music! Protest Songs, Message Music, and the Black Power Movement* (p. 1), argues that: 'Blackness. Power. Music. These concepts are the core of the black power movement and the ways in which it deconstructed and reconstructed American culture, politics, and society'. It is within this context that this study locates the role of music as a technology of disruption and construction. As Rabaka (2022) rightly states:

> [*T*]here have been studies that have examined the ways in which the movement represented a revitalisation of the post-Civil Rights Movement, African American Culture, and other studies have explored the regional and local cultures, politics, and tactics of the movement. (p. 1)

Within this context, black intellectualism offers a critical lens through which the emergence of black music can be understood as a technology of both deconstruction and reconstruction. Thus, the struggle of people of African descent, through black music, has performed various forms of music aimed at conscientising and mobilising the black populace to stand against white supremacy, colonisation, segregation and imperialism. Music serves as a machinery for political protest, and its songs, dance, theatre, literature and virtual arts can be traced throughout the history of colonialism, segregation, the Civil Rights Movement, the post-Civil Rights Movement, apartheid and (post)-apartheid South Africa. In these contexts, music functions as a technology of resistance against the coloniality of being and white imperialism.

As Rabaka contends, this body of literature on specific cultural movements and artistic expressions emerging from slave narratives to the evolution of classic jazz represents icons who captured and communicated the ideals and ethos of the struggle (2022:7). In this context, Blues music in the United States of America functioned as a distinct mode of communication that conveyed the black struggle. Similarly, reggae compositions expressed and rallied the black populace for revolution and liberation. Songs such as *Apartheid* by Peter Tosh, *War* and *Zimbabwe* by Bob Marley, *M.P.L.A.* (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola), *Angola*, and *Che* by the Revolutionaries, *Winnie Mandela* by Carlene Davis and *Harambe* by Rita Marley, demonstrate how music is part of the human existence and experiences can function as a weapon to challenge the imperial/Western/colonial/capitalist/racial system that has surveyed and objectified the black body as a disposable body.

While in South Africa, artists such as Miriam Makeba, Jonas Gwangwa, Brenda Fassie, Letta Mbulu, Stimela, and Hugh Masekela, to name but a few, utilised African proverbs, African linguistic heritage to conscientise the oppressed and marginalised. This technology of subterfuge finds its origin in the African approach of utilising praise songs, music to challenge the King and/or Queen and their advisors on the path that the community is undertaking. These may also include the matters that the community is unhappy with. The same strategy was also performed during the white minority rule. Thus, the work of Simphiwe Dana, Letta Mbuli, Hugh Masekela and Thandiswa Mazwai in 'post-apartheid' South Africa follows the same trajectory of applying music to draw society to the continual displacement of the black marginalised.

Based on the aforesaid, a definition of political protest music becomes imperative in analysing the geo-politics and the socio-economic conditions of those that the Western/Colonial/capitalist/modern/patriarchal/racist matrix of power has oppressed and displaced as things. Dhlamini (2017) defines political protest music as music that seeks to express dissatisfaction about a Western colonial system. Similarly, Obono (2017) opines that protest music is used as a communication tool to express disapproval, hurt and public dissatisfaction people have against a political system. While Segun (2015) critically states that protest values often tend to be diluted through the muse of art. Furthermore, Nueman (2008) argues that music is one of the strongest catalysts for change in a stratified society. Haycock (2015) critically interrogates the role of protest music and its relationship to social change, while scholars working on the analysis of protest music have often debated whether protest music performs a technology of subterfuge and social change. He further concludes that protest music can be employed to accomplish and to educate, revolutionise and conscientise a society to promote social change. Succinctly put, music can be used as a pedagogical tool of political consciousness (Haycock 2015).

Groenewald (2005) acknowledges the role political protest songs played in the fight against apartheid in South Africa, by stating that this form of oral tradition was central in awakening the minds of people against an oppressive system. This is imperative to note, as the very essence of Simphiwe Dana's *State of Emergency* seeks to awaken the minds of the colonial subjects. Ziv (2018) identifies the unifying role of protest music, by orienting people politically and cultivating social cohesion, to be central in the rise of a nation.

Fearing the power of music as a pedagogical tool for political consciousness, the white minority government censored and banned continental and Americas music. It can be argued that such a move by the white/colonial/apartheid state was

the fear that such music would arouse and weaponise the oppressed to rise and confront an unjust and oppressive state. While the apartheid system has been categorised as a repressive, discriminatory and violent state. The repressive, discriminatory and violent character of the white minority state ought to be analysed within the colonial matrix of power, within which the Western form of knowledge construction has been located inside whiteness. As Yancy (2004) argues in the following way:

> [*W*]hiteness, as a power/knowledge nexus, is able to produce new forms of knowledge (in this case 'knowledge' about black people) that are productive of new forms of 'subjects'. On this reading, whiteness, as a power/knowledge nexus with respect to black 'selves' and black bodies, produces a philosophical, epistemological, anthropological, phrenological, and political discursive field that 'enables a more continuous and pervasive control of what people do, which in turn offers further possibilities for more intrusive inquiry and disclosure'. (pp. 107–108)

In this context of a white, censored form of knowledge, the conditions of the oppressed are minimised. This is evident in the silencing and deaths of many South Africans through the the state machinery. Drewett (2005) argues that the struggle manifested in various forms beyond guerrilla warfare and public protest.

The resistance of white domination, in the context of South Africa, needs to be located within the geopolitical, socio-economic, Afro-spirituality and epistemic location of the oppressed. In her work, Zamisa (2020) tersely states that most of the protest action against the National Party (NP) government during the mid-to-late 1980s was driven and influenced by political songs.

Gilbert (2007) reminds us of the instrumental role music played in mobilising marginalised groups to perform subterfuge against the apartheid regime during the mid-to-late 1980s. He further argues for the importance of political songs and slogans during this era by stating that political mobilisation is crucial in shaping the minds of the oppressed (Gilbert 2007).

Additionally, Le Roux-Kemp (2014) maintains that political protest music is often censored because of its ability to invoke change in an oppressive state, through changing the laws that seek to marginalise a displaced community. Borrowing the concept of heterotopia (Foucault 1986) from Foucault, protest music intersects with space, 'othering', surveillance and performance of power by the white minority state as a form of governmentality. Heterotopia in the context of the black marginalised is the zone of nonbeing. Antiblackness and the bio-politicisation of black bodies is the lens through which music censorship, during this era, ought to be understood. McMahon (2018) provides a critical assessment of the anti-black agenda by describing which modern-day governments and state bureaucracies have used to regulate black bodies. In Foucauldian terms, such a form of power is referred to as 'biopower' (Foucault 1978:143) within the concept of governmentality.

Rouse (2021:364) reminds us how biopolitics continues to be a critical analytic tool employed to examine how a state regulates and 'disciplines' bodies it regards to be unruly. This form of power can be summarised in Foucauldian terms as biopower. The performance of biopower by the apartheid system functioned as a technology of surveillance, regulation of protest, black music and bodies of musicians such as Miriam Makeba, Sonny Okosun, Hugh Masekela and Dorothy Masuka – all examples of colonial subjects who were regarded as unruly by the state, resulting in their music being censored from mainstream South African radio. The apartheid-led government were well aware of the potency of this protest, music which led to the censorship of all protest music from mainstream radio and television (Thomas 2012). Schumann (2008) explains how musicians during this time needed to submit the lyrics to their songs to a committee at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), to ensure that no politically motivated music made it to the mainstream. State broadcasting, as a key and functional machinery to enforce power over the minds of the marginalised, was used to entrench the systemic anti-black agenda that sought to subjugate the minds of the oppressed. Following Foucault's (2008) concept of biopower and governmentality, it can be argued that this form of power cannot be analysed outside of the colonial matrix of power or what Butchart refers to as the anatomy of power.

From this premise, it is essential to place the argument that a song such as *State of Emergency* by Simphiwe Dana wields the power to bring the rise for the kind of systemic change that the Apartheid regime sought to suppress. The lamentations expressed in this song seek to reprogramme the minds of the largest population segment in South Africa – young black South Africans. With the notion of freedom of expression enshrined in our Constitution, songs that seek to remind young South Africans of the unfinished business should never be filtered out of the mainstream. The song by Dana needs to be located within the social and epistemic locations of the colonised subjects – being-in-the-world of blackness vis-á-vis the conditions of whiteness.

Music as a cornerstone of Black theology: Technology of spirituality and resistance

Music has historically been a fundamental component of Black theology, serving as both a spiritual practice and a mechanism of resistance against systemic oppression (Cone 1972). This profound intersection of spirituality and music is exemplified in the works of artists such as Simphiwe Dana, whose oeuvre critiques social injustices while simultaneously invoking Afrocentric consciousness and spiritual awareness. The role of music in spiritual resistance is particularly articulated through African American spirituals, which reflect the medium's remarkable capacity to inspire hope, foster resilience and forge communal connections to the promise of liberation (Dana 2020).

Spirituals and liberation theology

African American spirituals, deeply entrenched in biblical themes, have served as tools for coping with despair while concurrently embodying defiance and resilience. These musical expressions often carried concealed messages advocating for liberation and solidarity, utilising sacred symbolism to resist oppression covertly. A significant example of this is found in the call-and-response tradition, which is derived from African cultural practices and enabled enslaved Africans to articulate resistance through communal singing. Songs such as 'Go Down Moses' symbolised liberation while simultaneously promoting collective hope and unity among the oppressed (Cone 1972).

Music as hidden transcripts

In contexts of repression, music has functioned as a 'hidden transcript' of protest – serving as a covert means of resistance that conveys dissent through sacred imagery. This phenomenon was particularly salient in settings such as slavery and apartheid, where overt rebellion could be perilous. By embedding subversive messages within spirituals and gospel music, marginalised communities articulated their struggles and aspirations without resorting to explicit confrontation (Scott 1990).

Simphiwe Dana's contribution to Black theology and social critique

Simphiwe Dana's composition *State of Emergency* serves as a case study of how music can integrate Black theology with political critique. Through her references to historical struggles, including the youth uprisings of 1976, Dana draws connections between past movements and contemporary societal challenges, urging South Africans to confront ongoing inequalities. Her critical examination of neo-colonialism underscores the persistent systemic poverty and racial privilege that continue to undermine post-apartheid democracy. In her lyrics, Dana invokes spirituality as a conduit for awakening black consciousness and resisting marginalisation (Dana 2020).

Music as a catalyst for societal change

Historically, black women have utilised music as a vehicle for inspiring change in contexts where formal leadership roles were largely inaccessible. During the Civil Rights Movement, they played pivotal roles by leading songs that galvanised collective action and fostered a sense of hope. This legacy persists today, as contemporary artists act as modern-day prophets, articulating truths to power through their music. Dana's work is emblematic of this tradition, empowering marginalised voices and fostering a collective consciousness that seeks to confront and dismantle pervasive structures of oppression (Cone 1972).

State of Emergency as a performance of subterfuge: Heterotopia of struggles – Simphiwe Dana

The 1976 student uprising was the epitome of the struggle for social justice, which found resonance with the students. At the heart of the uprising was a call for self-worth, decolonising of the curriculum, equal opportunity and resistance against the brutalisation of black bodies by the apartheid system.

To commemorate the 1976 student uprising, award-winning singer Simphiwe Dana (2014), known for her vocal stance on societal issues, released a single on June 16th called *State of Emergency*. The song highlights the horrifying conditions of black bodies within the zone of nonbeing. These conditions were characterised by state-sponsored black-on-black violence. The 'new dispensation' has endeavoured little to improve the continual heterotopias and the dehumanisation of black bodies, as Terreblanche (2002) states that:

> Colonial authorities and white governments constantly attempted to justify the extraordinary use of political, military, and economic violence [...] What is beyond dispute, however, is that colonial authorities and white governments in South Africa constantly used their undemocratically acquired power, their extensive [*and often foreign*] military power, and their control over labour patterns to institutionalise and perpetuate the exploitation of indigenous people. Not surprisingly, the social injustice enforced and maintained by violent measures regularly provoked fierce resistance and counterviolence from the oppressed indigenous people. (pp. 400–401)

State of Emergency can be described as a form of political protest aimed at conscientising the minds of the marginalised black South Africans. However, viewing this song purely through a political lens would be diminishing the true essence of the message being relayed by this profound songstress. To fully embody the true meaning of the song, this section will take the form of two parts. Namely, the socio-political role and meaning of the song, and the spiritual meaning of the song – from an ethnomusicological perspective. The song by Dana reflects on the institutionalised violence that was mitted on black bodies. The image of violence embodies various nuances, namely: (1) space; (2) exploitation; (3) the education system; (4) access to resources; and (5) systemic racism. Furthermore, the song mirrors the ramifications of the Sunset Clause political 'liberation' rather than social justice. In her song, Dana points out the ugly remnants of systemic exploitation and discrimination of colonialism and apartheid that remain with us. The following lyrics demonstrate the performance of music as a technology of invoking the memory of the black experience. Dana (2014), in the song *State of Emergency*, expresses:

> '*Sayibamba syingena*'
>
> [We held it down, pressed it down]
>
> *Ngunongeni Ngunongeni*
>
> [It ain't a thing]

'Sabashiya bekhal' abazali'

[and left parents crying]

'Sabashiya bekhal' abazali'

[and left parents crying]

The first part of the lyrics reflects on the destruction of the African family nucleus, with young black students fleeing the country. The imagery of fleeing is integrally linked with the painful cries of parents who might not see their kids again. This metaphor not only refers to the relationship between the parents and the child but it also ought to be connected to the African understanding of community. This is informed by her use of the plural *abazali* [parents], signifying the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. From this philosophical premise, the struggle for social justice was a collective communal struggle. This stanza echoes the song *Soweto Blues* by Miriam Makeba that was composed in the aftermath of 1976, particularly the following line: 'A handful got away but all the others':

Black bodies strewn in the stress,

fires burning, brothers lost

John Vorster Square

Verwoerd, Security Police

Trending in the streets

State of Emergency

Another imagery that the song introduces is an image of brutality and violence committed on black bodies. Such an imagery cannot be separated from the notions of the 'right' of whiteness to penetrate, dispossess and displace that which it perceives to be the 'other'. Black bodies, in this instance, symbolise the dispossessed. Furthermore, the second stanza illustrates the destruction of black bodies as penetrable bodies. The names John Vorster and Verwoerd are an embodiment of a non-penetrable body endowed with the 'divine privilege' and 'right' to exercise and perform whiteness. What Dana does with the two symbols that epitomise white brutality is evoke in the memory of the oppressed the image of the viciousness and mercilessness inflicted upon black bodies. In other words, the apartheid system viewed black bodies as 'disposable bodies' that can be subject to any form of violence, be displaced, penetrated, subjugated, through the use of militarisation of the police to torture, detain, harass and murder. The existential reality that black bodies faced, was a constant *State of Emergency*, with no rights and equal justice (Dana 2014):

State sponsored black-on-black violence

Uprisings, stairways, boycotts

no education

Stand for the fire in your heart

Stand for, for, for the fruits of your living

Stand,

Stand

One of the important images that Dana brings to the fore is the state of war within the zone of nonbeing. This state is characterised by uprisings, stairways, boycotts and a lack of education. Such a state of war is a form of destruction, annihilation of the social fabric and demolition of the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* by turning brother against brother and sister against sister. As Fanon (1961) reminds us that:

> The colonized world is a world divided in two. The dividing line, the border, is represented by the barracks and the police stations. In the colonies, the official, legitimate agent, the spokesperson for the colonizer and the regime of oppression, is the police officer or the soldier. (p. 3)

It is in this stanza that the spiritual element of the struggle becomes evident. Thus, Dana calls upon the spirit of resistance, by saying: 'stand for the fire in your heart'. Drawing on Cabral's (2016) analysis of resistance, this stanza demonstrates the intersectionality of political, economic, cultural and armed resistance. It is in the section 'The use of spirituality within music as a form of resistance' that we notice the intersection of political and spiritual consciousness.

The use of spirituality within music as a form of resistance

Prayers and wailings in Soweto

They take everything to God

Comfort me

Prayers and wailings in Soweto

They take everything in God

They take everything to God

Comfort me

Where are the youth of 1976?

When children die

in this here democracy

This stanza introduces a new dynamic in the song, namely a prayer, specifically a prayer of lamentation. The repeated phrases "Prayers and wailings in Soweto" and "They take everything to God" convey the act of praying and seeking divine comfort. The phrase "Comfort me" reflects a personal, heartfelt plea within this prayer. Additionally, the lament is deepened by the juxtaposition of the lines "Where are the youth of 1976?" and "When children die in this here democracy," which express sorrow and mourning over both past and present struggles. This interplay effectively captures the tone of lamentation in the song.

From an ethnomusicological perspective, it becomes necessary to acknowledge the role music plays in calling on spirits (Jankowsky 2007). Chitando (2007) argues that music enables us to connect with the departed souls. It is in this stanza that Dana calls upon black consciousness spiritual awareness. This is further heightened by her call on the youth of 1976. This stanza also highlights Afrocentrism, Nigritude and decoloniality. Dana, as a colonial subject, engenders the spiritual aspect of music as a form of cultural resistance against a neo-colonialist,

capitalist Western form of governance, namely 'democracy'. Soweto, as a heterotopia of resistance, is employed as a space of struggle. She laments and speaks truth to power by raising the consistent inequalities experienced by the black majority. She does that by not only invoking the spirit of the youth of 1976, but also calls out the so-called struggle stalwarts. 'Where are the youth of 1976, Sellout black leadersforgotten memories'. By invoking the youth of 1976 and calling out black leaders as sell-outs, the aim is to awaken the consciousness of post-1994 black youth, encouraging them to resist the ongoing marginalisation and poverty in their communities.

From this perspective, Simphiwe Dana magnifies the notion of cultural resistance by calling on the spirit embodied by the youth of 1976, in which she says: 'where are the youth of 1976?'. 'When children die in this here democracy' – this is where the binary of the era of the *State of Emergency* during apartheid and the post-1994 'democratic' South African illusion can be examined. She laments: 'education or no jobs only poverty reigns in our streets'. Dana links the state of despair and social injustice with the continual sustenance of white privilege, 'festering in the youth white institutionalised deceit in our Constitution tell them the revolution has fallen'. As Mothoagae (2021a, 2021b) argues that the notion of national identity as a rainbow nation endures to be 'an ideal, a dream to be dreamt at night for as long as the Constitution, religion and ethnicity dominate the race discourse in South Africa' (p. 52). In his critique of Vice's article, McKaiser (2010) deliberates on white privilege and supremacy post-1994. McKaiser (2010) states:

> [B]e mindful of how your whiteness still benefits you and gives you unearned privileges. Engage black South Africans with humility and be mindful of not reinforcing whiteness as normative […]. (n.p.)

It is in the above citation that what Dana refers to as the 'festering in the youth white institutionalised deceit in our constitution' further illustrates the problems of the Constitution, the illusion of a liberated and equal South Africa. Thus, the denial that whiteness is not associated with power, economy and the spirituality of superiority, consciously or unconsciously so, negates the struggle of the black folk. It is for that reason that she declares, 'tell them the revolution has fallen'. This can also be observed in the song by Letta Mbulu *Not Uhuru* ('Not Yet Freedom'). From this premise, it is essential to place the argument that a song such as *State of Emergenc*y, by Simphiwe Dana, wields the power to bring the rise for the kind of systemic change that the apartheid regime sought to suppress. The lamentations expressed in this song seek to reprogramme the minds of the largest population segment in South Africa – young black South Africans. With the notion of freedom of expression enshrined in our Constitution, songs that seek to remind young South Africans of the unfinished business should never be filtered out of the mainstream.

Conclusion

Black theology and spirituality in music as resistance

In conclusion, music has consistently served as a powerful medium for resistance, social critique, machinery of political protest and cultural preservation across both historical and contemporary contexts. This dynamic is intricately linked to the tenets of Black theology. Simphiwe Dana's '*State of Emergency*' serves as a poignant illustration of this enduring legacy, seamlessly integrating Afrocentric Spirituality with incisive critiques of systemic oppression in post-apartheid South Africa. Her characterisation of Soweto as a 'heterotopia of resistance' and her references to the 1976 youth uprisings underscore the continuity between historical struggles and contemporary injustices. Likewise, the works of artists such as Thandiswa Mazwai in 'Nizalwa Ngobani?' and Letta Mbulu in 'Not Yet Uhuru' underscore the unfinished project of liberation, highlighting the persistent social inequalities that permeate South African society.

Black theology offers a foundational framework for understanding how music serves as an instrument of resistance. As articulated by James Cone, black worship represents an authentic expression of the lived experiences of black individuals, offering spiritual fortitude in the face of oppression. This theological perspective is exemplified in African American spirituals, which encoded messages of resistance during the enslavement period, as well as in gospel music that drove initiatives during the Civil Rights Movement. Iconic songs such as Nina Simone's 'Mississippi Goddam' and Sam Cooke's 'A Change Gonna Come' illuminate how faith-infused music has historically galvanised collective action and sustained hope amid adversity.

In contemporary contexts, artists such as Kendrick Lamar ('Alright') and Beyoncé ('Freedom') perpetuate this rich tradition by confronting ongoing social struggles through their lyrical narratives. Simphiwe Dana's oeuvre similarly embodies the principles of black theology, as she invokes a spiritual consciousness to critique systemic inequalities and advocate for socio-political liberation. Her vocal lamentations resonate with the theological emphasis on justice and deliverance, thereby transforming music into a vehicle for reprogramming collective consciousness and challenging oppressive structures.

Ultimately, black music transcends being merely a cultural artefact, evolving into a catalyst for liberation. By intertwining spiritual expression with activism, it cultivates resilience, inspires justice movements and amplifies the voices of marginalised communities. Simphiwe Dana's '*State of Emergency*' stands as a testament to this profound legacy, illustrating how music can serve both as a mirror reflecting societal conditions and a beacon illuminating pathways for meaningful transformation. This tradition highlights the transformative power of black music to shape collective consciousness and inspire social action through its profound connections to black theology.

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I.D.M. contributed towards the conceptualisation and methodology of the article. T.N. was involved the conceptualisation of the article.

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