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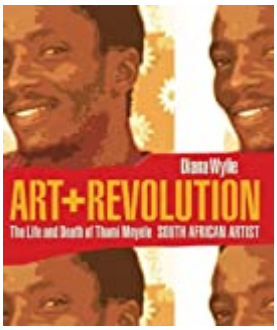

Diana Wylie. *Art and Revolution: The Life and Death of Thami Mnyele, South African Artist.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2008. Illustrations. 264 pp. $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8139-2764-0.

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Art and the Biographical Turn in South Africa

In the concise prologue to this book, Diana Wylie describes Thami Mnyele (1948-85) as simply âa person who liked to drawâ (p. 7). This initial summary, if modestly stated, nevertheless captures the essence of what Mnyele did, who he became, and, ultimately, why his life matters. It equally establishes the complex questions that motivate this book: What role can artists possibly have in a revolutionary struggle? Is art a mere extravagance, secondary to political strategy and armed resistance? Finally, how might a personâs life, or even a communityâs life, be reconstructed and understood through such visual evidence? *Art and Revolution* is, in plain terms, a biography of a noted South African artist whose work interrogated the individual and collective experience of apartheid during the 1970s and early 1980s. But it is also a cultural history, an intellectual history, and, unavoidably, a political history of this period. In this manner, Wylieâs book belongs to the efflorescence of life histories–biography and autobiography alike–published since the mid-1990s that have sought to take stock of the apartheid period in a fashion parallel to that of South Africaâs Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). More specifically, *Art and Revolution* contributes to the insights of work by Bill Nasson, Charles van Onselen, and others who have revived the biographical form in different ways as a working genre for social historians.[1]

Indeed, in her opening preface, Wylie positions her book in a manner similar to van Onselenâs *The Seed is Mine* (1996). Although certainly better known in his lifetime, Mnyele like Kas Maine did not leave many personal documents, and key sources of evidence for Wylie are the interviews she collected as well as her own memories of Mnyele, whom she knew personally. However, his artwork itself provides an additional, invaluable resource for her narrative, presenting a key departure from van Onselenâs landmark study. In contrast to the life of Maine, whose economic resilience van Onselen uses to explore and signify the agency of South African peasants during the twentieth century, Wylie employs Mnyeleâs artwork to uncover a more complex psychological portrait of the individual under constrained political and social circumstances. Undeniably, the loss and

regaining of selfhood under such conditions constitutes a key theme of his stark and frequently abstract imagery. Wylie utilizes this individual artistic vision to gesture toward the broader social and psychological traumas experienced by many involved in the anti-apartheid struggle–an interpretive approach that Mnyele himself would undoubtedly appreciate. The abundance of illustrations by Mnyele and other artists throughout Wylieâs biography attest to the nuance and strength of this particular form of political imagination and, more generally, the potential of artwork as evidence for reconstructing social history.

Divided into eight chapters plus an epilogue and afterword, *Art and Revolution* begins by locating Mnyele within a social milieu that on the surface would be appear to be unlikely grounds for the birth of an artist. Chapters 1 through 3 trace his childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood in the township of Alexandra (Alex) in Johannesburg and the village of Makapanstad north of Pretoria. As Wylie emphasizes, Mnyele's birth in 1948 meant that his world was shaped by National Party policy from the outset, leaving little shelter from the political strife that ensued. His father, David Mnyele, was a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and his mother, Sarah Thamane, joined the African National Congress (ANC) Womenâs League during the 1950s, both early indicators of his political future. However, he came from a broken home, with his parentsâ separation occurring only two years after his birth. Mnyeleâs coming of age consequently possessed recurrent periods of instability. Art provided a focus and aspiration. Through Alexâs jazz scene and his friendships with journalist James Bokwe Mafuna and the writer Mongane Wally Serote, Mnyele found a circle of politically minded and creatively driven people who supported his interests. Through such connections, he discovered the artwork of Dumile Feni–a role model even though they never met–and participated in the formation of two artistic groups (Mihloti and MDALI). He eventually attended Rorkeâs Drift art school in Natal, where he experienced a crucial period of formal training despite feeling displaced and unhappy. Indeed, Wylie argues that Mnyele felt creatively stifled by the academic approach emphasized there, marking a turning point in how he viewed art and the artist and their social roles.

Chapters 4 through 6 address this transformation and how Mnyele achieved an artistic vision at once broadly political and deeply personal. Given the atmosphere of the early to mid-1970s, Black Consciousness had influenced his political and artistic thought since before he left for Rorkeâs Drift. But his return to Alex resulted in a new shift to âmysterious, open, almost dreamy imageryâ that attempted more psychic renderings of life rather than figurative depictions (p. 76). His art also began to receive more serious gallery attention, which conflicted him–not only in response to the classic tension between art and commerce, but also over the question of politics. Did acceptance, particularly by a white elite, represent an unintended compromise in his vision? This dilemma was reconciled in part by the escalation of state oppression. With friends being arrested and his own brief detention by police, demoralization became an everyday sentiment–assuaged momentarily by his marriage to Naniwe Mputa and the birth of his daughter Nomathamsanqa–but leading to his eventual exile in Botswana. Along with the additional pressure of an extramartial affair, the coincidence of Steve Bikoâs death with Mnyeleâs first major exhibition, entitled âA New Day,â in 1977 proved to be the catalyst for his decision to escape, a move encouraged by his friend Wally Serote, who was already in Gaborone. His flight was made on personal, political, and artistic grounds.

With this transition, Wylieâs narrative opens out to become a regional history of the anti-apartheid struggle. As with many others, Mnyele found his choice of exile resulting not in safety and comfort, but instead exchanging one form of vulnerability for another. Wylie describes in chapter 5 how Mnyele connected with the Medu Art Ensemble, though competition and distrust existed alongside efforts toward community. âExiles readily fell into mutual recrimination,â she writes, and the personal conflicts he encountered were âsymptomatic of quarrels that went on regularly among the highly insecure exiles..... They may have talked romantically of solidarity but they lived in what sometimes seemed to be a nest of vipers. They were rarely certain whom to trustâ (p. 121). Still, his involvement in Medu spurred Mnyele's political and artistic evolution. As its chairman in 1982, he organized the Culture and Resistance Festival in July of that year, which involved such ANC supporters as Abdullah Ibrahim, Hugh Masekela, and Nadine Gordimer. The program of art, ideas, and politics argued for art beyond commerce and, more specifically, the role of the âcultural workerâ in the ANCâs liberation struggle. Yet, as Mnyele himself characterized it, this latter position–representing popular interests on the one hand yet attempting to inspire them on the other– proved to be a challenging one (p. 162). Wylie argues that while the festival did generate later events, the intellectual outcome was consequently less clear. Mnyele himself con-

tinued to produce political posters–the key idiom of his art during this late period–to aid the struggle though he also left for a period of MK military training in Angola in 1983. Upon his return to Botswana, he taught other recruits how to use explosives, in addition to turning out graphic artwork for the ANC, the South African Congress of Trade Unions, and the United Democratic Front. In May 1985 he married Rhona Segale, his long-time companion and mother of his son, Sindelo.

This renewed attempt at stability did not last. Chapters 7 and 8 describe the sudden end to Mnyeleâs life and the particular journey his death undertook a decade later through the TRC and reburial in South Africa. Wylieâs biography also takes a turn, becoming much more a personal story told by a participant-observer. Mnyele died as the result of a cross-border raid by a South African Defence Force special forces unit, and Wylie vividly captures the claustrophobic mood and the haphazard convergence of mundane contingencies that led to his murder. She goes as far to imagine what his death might have been like–âThe bullets caught Thami as he started to scale the fenceâ (p. 201)–though she reconstructs this scene with evidence and caution, including testimony by those soldiers involved. Twelve people died in total. Moving to the present, chapter 8 describes how Mnyeleâs remains were returned to South Africa in 2004, nineteen years after his death. Wylie herself participated in this process, traveling to Botswana and back with his family, and she recalls this act of return and his memorial service specifically as consisting of a âmix of myth and inattentionâ (p. 226). Although the outpouring of personal tributes restored Mnyeleâs life to public memory, Wylie questions the style of political theater equally present at the occasion, suggesting that even in death his âpersonal life was being sacrificed for the movementâ (p. 221).

These tensions between the individual and the collective, personal self-expression and more general political need, ultimately comprise the major themes of this book as conveyed at the start of this review. Wylieâs biography ends with an epilogue and afterword, essentially offering two conclusions to Mnyeleâs story. Her epilogue, entitled âThe War of Values,â offers a powerful, if brief, account of her encounters with two of the soldiers involved in Mnyeleâs death. One, ironically enough, is living a stable middle-class life in Gaborone selling insurance and the other is in a South African prison for murder, albeit for killing âa drug lordâ (p. 232). Wylie subtly draws out the similarities between Mnyele and these men–their shared commitment to community and political cause, above all–but also the contradictory outcome that has resulted, where the two men ostensibly on the losing side get to live. As applied to the South African war a century earlier, is this a case of losing the war, but winning the peace? Her second conclusion in the afterword, âArt and Revolution,â addresses the more abstract issue of ârevolutionâ and whether the âcultural workâ of artists can ever achieve such change. She discusses the Bolshevik revolution, the artwork of Diego Rivera, and the ideas of John Berger, among other examples, to explore this question. Post-apartheid South Africa did not result in the kind of revolutionary culture that Mnyele and other artist-activists had once envisioned–quite the opposite, by embracing neoliberal capitalism and its financial opportunism–yet for Wylie this failure does not compromise Mnyeleâs beliefs or his life generally. She concludes her book by praising Mnyele for his integrity in making the difficult choice of community politics over individual artistic success.

In sum, Wylie does not offer easy answers to these larger questions of art versus politics or art versus commerce. Indeed, this impasse echoes Mnyeleâs own dilemmas with these issues. The manner of his death suggests an ultimate choice of politics, but what if he had escaped this contingency? Would art have won out, as Wylie herself ponders, through a career in the post-apartheid era? Indeed, has it won through his artistic legacy today? Such opposing views, moreover, do not necessarily have to represent a categorical choice, but instead a set of mutually constitutive relationships, with politics defining art, art spurring commerce, and so forth. A key strength of Wylieâs biography is her presentation of these abstract issues while at the same time keeping social or critical theory at armâs length, a refreshing decision given the material at hand and the current popularity of cultural studies and postcolonial thought within contemporary South African scholarship. Undoubtedly other scholars will apply this treatment to Mynele's artwork to useful ends. But her fidelity to his life and its context offers something more satisfying and needed. *Art and Revolution* provides vivid descriptions of township life from the 1950s through the 1970s, a fascinating interpersonal view of the political transitions from Sharpeville to the Soweto Uprising and beyond, and a ground-level perspective on the regional turn that anti-apartheid activism took during the mid to late 1970s. Such details, combined with the abundant illustrations of artwork by Mnyele and others, make this a compelling text for teaching. But they also provide insight into the complex political imaginations that gained traction during these decades, especially those that extended beyond the conventions of na-

tionalism and class struggle.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that a particular spirit inhabits this book, consisting of personal memory and obligation to a friend lost in the prime of his life. Wylie puts forth this feeling in her preface, although she is keen to work against a sentimentality that would compromise the experiences and vision of Mnyele. Nevertheless, she writes of âThamiâ on a first-name basis throughout, an approach that draws the reader in, blurring the boundary between historian and subject in a way that raises stimulating questions of what we do, how we do it, and why. Overall, this book marks yet another intellectual departure for Wylie, demonstrating a versatility to be much admired.

Note

[1]. See Bill Nasson, *Abraham Esauâs War: A Black South African War in the Cape, 1899-1902* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Charles van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper, 1894-1985* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996); and Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

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