Subsequent chapters explore the more conventional terrain of Afropolitanism, examining the short stories of Afrodiasporic writers Sefi Atta and Chimamanda Ngozi (Chapter 2) and the homecoming narrative of the Francophone writer Alain Mabanckou (Chapter 3). Toivanen’s association of various types of class privilege with anxiety produced by the contradictory freedoms of “modern forms of mobility” creates a thread of postcolonial malaise running through the “troubled” psyche of the privileged postcolonial subjects examined in this section, countering the myth of carefree and somewhat facile cosmopolitanism defined by Taiye Selasi in “Bye-bye Babar (Or: What is an Afropolitan?)”, published in 2005.

The middle section of the book, “Budget Travels, Practical Cosmopolitanisms”, moves further down the economic ladder, reading technologies of mobility through selected works by Liss Kihindou, Véronique Tadjo, NoViolet Bulawayo and Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche. Given the number of texts in this highly interesting chapter (Chapter 4), one wishes that more space could have been given to delving deeper into the texts and developing ideas around the “mobile poetics of communication technologies” (91). The idea of non-physical or virtual mobilities of producers of an accessible form of “worldliness” or practical cosmopolitanism offers a fresh perspective on these texts.

In subsequent chapters, the notion of practical cosmopolitanisms is related to urban mobilities through works by Alain Mabanckou and Michèle Rakotoson (Chapter 5), and migrant mobilities in Fabienne Kanor’s *Faire l’aventure* (Chapter 6). Again, the strength of Toivanen’s analysis lies in the cartographies of the everyday, and quotidian acts of crossing social, economic, and cultural borders. Within the urban context the French concept of “débrouillardise” (resourcefulness) emerges as a term that encapsulates the sort of practical cosmopolitanism that is developed by the need to adapt to new or unfamiliar environments and technologies (115–9). Productively, the line of argumentation around anxieties produced by Western modernity, developed in the first section of the study, is connected to the fragilities that necessitate “débrouillardise” as a border-crossing strategy of survival (136).

The final section of the study, “Abject Travels of Citizens of Nowhere”, takes us to the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, covering the familiar representational terrain of clandestinely, precarity and unbelonging. This culminates in the chapter that reads “zombificaton” as the ultimate failure of cosmopolitanism through an analysis of J. R. Essomba’s *Le Paradis du nord* and Caryl Phylip’s *A Distant Shore* (Chapter 9). Although the metaphor of the zombie is developed with reference to imaginaries of “contagious alterity” and Fortress Europe protecting itself against a “contagious blackness” (202) is evocative, this as Afropean mobility unwittingly precludes a discussion of the mobility with reference to longer histories of African descendants being European. That said, this weakness does not necessarily undermine the critical intervention made by Toivanen’s study. Overall, the book is structured, through its three sections, as complex taxonomy of cosmopolitanisms produced by class-based forms of mobility. Moreover, the fine-grained reading of an impressively broad corpus produces a multi-layered understanding of postcolonial African and Afrodiasporic cosmopolitanisms and mobilities that complicates the simplistic opposition between the privileged Afropolitan at one end of the scale, and the abject figure of the migrant at the other.

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Siphiwo Mahala.
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The biography has become a staple of Wits University Press’s catalogue over the past decade. Regina Gelana Twala, Patrick van Rensburg, Richard Rive, and Dorothea Bleek are some of the figures who have seen their life and work be the object of sustained critical inquiry in this series of biographies. Joining this list is Siphiwo Mahala’s study of Can Themba, a “Drum Boy” best known for his short stories.

A notable difference between the other biographies and this one is the relative prominence of Themba. Whilst Twala, Van Rensburg, and others are by no means unknown, Themba has a more prominent stature as an oft-anthologised, studied, and re-interpreted figure. However, as Mahala reminds us in the introduction, “reference to [Themba’s] biographical background is scant [, and w]here reference is made to
biographical details, there are barely any substantive facts that give an epistemological account” (5). This is what the book seeks to address—both life history in the general sense, and artistic and intellectual history in particular.

Being a creative writer of plays and short fiction that explicitly speak to Themba’s life as well as being an academic, Mahala is particularly well-suited to write this biography of a figure who was equal parts writer and intellectual. It is also this duality that makes the Themba-biography a difficult one to approach. For whilst the biographical genre follows a rather simple rule, i.e., encapsulate the life of a specific figure, the specificities of the figure places certain demands on the researcher. In Themba’s case, the duality demands both an artist and intellectual biography.

In relation to the artist biography, Mahala’s position as a writer and literary scholar allows his research to offer a scintillating synthesis of readings of both historical data and literary texts; with the literary texts being Themba’s and the writers Themba regarded as influential to his own style. Mahala analyses, for example, the influence of Shakespeare on Themba’s formative poetry as a student at the University of Fort Hare, discussing how “[t]he metrical feet and rhyme are typical of the linguistic nuances and the quintessential Shakespearean rhythms” (28).

Literary texts, however, remain a limited source. And here Mahala deserves a great deal of praise. His incorporation of oral history, and in particular his approach to the inclusion of long sections—sometimes entire paragraphs—of oral testimony leads to the book having a feel of immediacy and generosity: immediacy in relation to memory, and generosity in relation to highlighting the sources of memory (rather than hiding them in footnotes and endnotes).

Beyond shaping an intimate relationship to sources, this approach also allows a great deal of complexity to bubble to the surface throughout the book. Speaking on the ‘nature’ of Themba’s intellectualism, for example, Mahala argues that the “closest we can come is to label him a pragmatist, simply because he adapted to different situations and contexts; but this is not always an accurate assessment, as testimonies by people close to him, such as Jean Hart, reveal that he was never afraid of taking unconventional or extreme positions at times” (147). The oral, then, becomes a source for complexity—offering as much intimacy into the memory of those who knew him as uncertainty about how much we could ever truly know of him.

The intellectual biographical dimension of the book is satisfied through Mahala’s discussion of the concept of the ‘intellectual tsotsi’. As evidence of his stature as intellectual, Themba’s living room in Sophiatown was famously known as the ‘House of Truth’. This reflects the space created therein for probing debate and the fearless pursuit for knowledge. And although it is mostly his time as an adult in Sophiatown that is associated with his ‘intellectual tsotsiship’, Mahala’s narration points to Themba being a leading intellectual amongst his peers throughout his life.

‘Intellectual tsotsi’ is a concept that has been used elsewhere (Anon; Nkuna), but which has not been teased out in a sustained way. The entirety of chapter 12 is devoted to this question and focuses on the concept in relation to Antonio Gramsci’s well-known notion of the ‘organic intellectual’ specifically, and the ‘public intellectual’ more generally. As Mahala notes, Themba ‘fits’ Gramsci’s description of the intellectual in many ways yet diverged from it as well. Notably, whereas Gramsci regarded a fascination with abstract thinking as foundational to the ‘intellectual’, Mahala points to Themba’s groundedness that made him engage more widely than purely through traditional intellectual avenues.

Here I would posit Mahala misses an opportunity to offer a substantive delineation of the ‘intellectual tsotsi’. Beyond drawing on Gramsci’s understanding of the intellectual, Mahala also refers to Mari Snyman’s argument for regarding Themba as a ‘shebeen intellectual’. Where Mahala notes some differences between the figure of Themba as an intellectual and Gramsci’s theorisation, he offers no substantive critique of Snyman’s thesis—which begs the question why ‘intellectual tsotsi’ would have to be used at all. Considering the centrality of this concept in the biography’s title, it is a missed opportunity that could have offered a novel understanding. In a time of township studies, this could have been particularly generative.

Beyond the possibility for Mahala to have demarcated the distinctness of the ‘intellectual tsotsi’ as a figure more clearly, the only other point of criticism I could level at the book is Mahala’s focus on Themba’s reception and legacy in singular terms. Mahala notes in the introduction that a central motivation for writing the book was to provide an account different from the overwhelmingly group-centric approach that dominates studies of the Drum Boys. There is, Mahala convincingly argues, a need to understand Themba in relation to his own history, not only as ‘another’ Drum Boy. At the same time, the individualised focus on Themba, I would argue, leads to statements reflecting
exceptionalism—statements that are, in fact, often true in relation to leading artists and intellectuals who had a similar life trajectory. For example, when Mahala notes that “[i]n yet another paradox, his [Themba’s] passing sparked interest and breathed new life into his oeuvre, thus entrenching his name in the annals of journalism and the literary landscape in South Africa” (5), one only has to turn to a myriad of leading figures in world history, such as Vincent van Gogh, Emily Dickinson, and Franz Kafka, to see a similar pattern unfold. In this sense, a more historicised view of Themba would have benefited the biography.

Despite these criticisms, Mahala’s biography paves the way not only for a historicised understanding of Themba and his work, and, by implication, the lives and legacies of the Drum Boys generally, but offers a rare example of an artist-intellectual biography; a book that marries literary analyses and reflections on intellectual development. That Mahala further draws on rich oral history makes this a uniquely stimulating read. It has the potential to become an important archive unto itself, offering a writerly map for South Africanists working in biography, intellectual history, and literary studies going forward.

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