

Decolonising theological education in urban spaces

A reflection on the “*Abantu Book Festival*”

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Abstract

The article argues that “Abantu Book Festival” (Abantu) held in Soweto annually signifies a decolonising space for theological education in the urban areas surrounding Soweto. From the perspective of Black theology of liberation (BTL) paradigms, the clear focus on blackness as a methodological framework for the Abantu programme signifies Abantu as a festival reflecting critically on the Black experience post-1994. Moreover, Soweto, with its resistance history, relates Abantu to Black culture, and urban realities post-1994. In its programme, African Spirituality becomes the source of knowledge for Abantu’s decolonial project, thus, enabling the spirit of Ubuntu as a lived, and a living philosophy at Abantu. In this article, therefore, I want to argue that Abantu exhibits BTL with a praxis-based spirituality for theological education in urban areas. Abantu’s use of blackness, and Soweto as interlocutors automatically connects Abantu to the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), Pan Africanist narratives of return, thus enables Black Theology Liberation.

Keywords: Abantu, Black, Liberation, Theology Education, African, Spirituality, Ubuntu

1. The Abantu Book Festival narrative: An introduction

The founder and the curator of Abantu Book Festival, Thando Mqgolozana, states that the festival has its foundations from the Fallist student call for decolonisation of the education system. In 2015, South Africa’s democratic dispensation experienced fundamental changes as Black students formed collective resistance against the status quo. Rhodes Must Fall (#RMF) movement called for the removal of colonial-imperialists hero Cecil John Rhodes in the University of Cape Town (UCT).² #RMF campaign led to broader student movements in higher education which include #FeesMustFall, #EndOutsourcing, and the call for decolonisation of the education system. However, the novelist, Mqgolozana argues that Abantu was born out of his frustration “of having to perform Blackness in the White literary world of South

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² Susan Booysen, ed., *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2016).

Africa.”³ Thus, for Mqgolozana, Abantu Book Festival is first a healing space for Black readers and writers.⁴

One of the Fallists students, authors, and curator of Abantu, Panashe Chigumadzi, expressed that the festival provides Black authors and readers with the due recognition they deserved. It has become a space where Black authors and writers “are not forced into White spaces that have no room for Blackness and its different expressions.”⁵ Abantu Book Festival sets itself “as a literary movement that is not rooted on notions of coloniality.”⁶

I want to state that for a womanist and a Black theology of liberation scholar, the most revolutionary and decolonial thing at Abantu Book festival is its focus on Black women. Black women at Abantu take centre stage as they direct the conversations that take place at Abantu, and these women are African and Africana women. Therefore, as a member of the Circle for Concerned African Women theologians (Circle), having been influenced by Mercy Amba Oduyoye on the need for Black women to write and voice their experiences.⁷ I felt compelled to write this article, narrating how I experience Abantu as a Black theologian, and how Black women are shaping discourses on spirituality, and healing at Abantu.

In 2019, two African women, Mona Eltahwy and D’bi young Anitafrika, shared the keynote address at Abantu. Mona Eltahwy is an Egyptian-American journalist and commentator specialising on interfaith gatherings, human rights, feminism and Muslim-Christian relations. While D’bi is a Jamaican storyteller who is an internationally acclaimed artist for her Dub poet, monodramatist, and a director and an educator. Some of the questions that D’bi dealt with in her poetry sessions at Abantu included the following:

- What does it mean to self-recover, and how do we decolonise our bodies?
- Where do we turn for spiritual guidance?
- When is it right to fight for what you believe in?
- From whom do we learn how to love, how do we hold ourselves accountable for the harm we cause?
- Is it our responsibility to create new systems of emancipation as we tear down old oppressive ones?

³ Thando Mqgolozana on how can we decolonise SA literature - The Mail & Guardian

⁴ <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/life/books/2017-12-13-festival-rewrites-colonial-narrative-and-plots-future-of-black-literature/>

⁵ “Abantu Book Festival: Nothing Short of an Introspective Space – The Journalist,” accessed April 19, 2020, <https://www.thejournalist.org.za/spotlight/abantu-book-festival-nothing-short-of-an-introspective-space>.

⁶ “Abantu Book Festival.”

⁷ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Standing on Both Feet,” *The Ecumenical Review* 33, no. 1 (January 1, 1981): 60–71, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.1981.tb02543.x>.

In 2016, Mama Gcina Mhlophe gave the first keynote address. Mama Mhlophe is the woman who shaped my very thinking on Ubuntu as philosophy. Mama Gcina Mhlophe specialises on storytelling, and her stories focussed on African folktales. Growing up we used to look forward to our Saturday mornings as the radio uMhlobo Wenene used to broadcast her stories.

While, in 2017, the keynote address was given by Tsitsi Dangarembga, a Zimbabwean novelist, playwright, and filmmaker famously known for her debut novel *Nervous Conditions*, (1988). Tsitsi Dangarembga, in her address, highlighted that she writes for transformation and not entertainment. So that human beings can transform from what they been through in their lives.⁸

In a radio interview, Panashe Chigumadzi argued that the announcement by Thando Mqgolozana that he was quitting the Franschhoek literary festival (“quitting White literary industry”) was a catalyst for change in the entire countries literary work. The Abantu Book Festival symbolises a time for love, “Black writers thinking that they need to love themselves enough to do something for themselves.” As a result, it has been suggested that Abantu has grown from cultural content, fun, experience to a programme that includes poetry, musical performance, photography, dance, food, conversation, and film screening.

In 2019, Abantu Book Festival did a play entitled *Venus vs Modernity: The story of Saartjie Baartman*. The performance was an adaptation of Saartjie Baartman who was transported and paraded in Europe as a savage monstrous woman. In her death, Baron Georges Cuvier dissected Baartman’s body. He then argued that Saartjie’s race with woolly hair and compressed skulls is condemned to never-ending inferiority.

The play of Saartjie at Abantu presented for us a moment of healing, but also of protest. A friend of mine, Kagiso Nkosi, expressed how he liked the performance because it related to current body politics of blackness and blackness to its historical context. The play was able to reflect current emotive traumas caused by how Black bodies are constructed within historical settings.

2. Why blackness is the interlocutor for the Abantu Book Festival in Soweto?

I want to point out that Abantu is a Black space where one gets to meet public intellectuals, activists, authors, politicians, pan Africanist thinkers, conscious blacks and others. The festival is an extension of the decolonial project into public discourses creating a space that does not exclude or alienate Black people. In her interview, Chigumadzi pointed out that the Abantu Fest programme was not just

⁸ “Abantu Book Festival.”

about the authors and writers, it is a programme that encompasses different politics, perspectives, and views.⁹

The festival is not just about South Africa, but it forms part of such festivals across the continent and the diaspora. Lola Shoneyin, as the founder of Aké Art in Nigeria, pointed out that festivals like Abantu, the Gaborone Book Festival (Botswana), and Aké and others are set up to exist so that African authors can address African problems with an African audience.¹⁰ With artists like Lebo Mashile who always point to the audience that such “spaces are meant to create a safe space for Africans to discuss African matters in the safety of each other’s company.”¹¹

However, every year Abantu’s decision to be pro-black, and only allow Black people into the festival has left some people unhappy, therefore interpreting the festival as an exclusion of White people. Black people who have White friends had to tell their White friend that the festival was only for Black people. I saw interracial couples who had to drop their kids and leave one of the parents. Imagine the kinds of conversations those parents had to have “why daddy or mommy” is not coming with us.

Of course, many White people have critiqued this stance as not progressive, while some of the Black people felt that Abantu needed to reconsider its White position. Mishka Wazar who considered herself an ally penned down an article in the Vox on “Why Abantu Book Fest Needs to Reconsider Its White People Stance”, in 2018.

Wazar in the article mourned the death of “Rainbow nationalism” arguing that since the dawn of progressive politics, there has been a growing number of anti-White participants in Black spaces. Wazar labelled such decisions as “populist identity politics” influenced by Fallists movements such as Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), and Black Land First (BLF) and #FeesMustFall movements.¹²

Wazar argued that such decisions to exclude White people are a watershed moment in South Africa’s literary spheres because the best use of Abantu is to “create a space not only of Black praise but also education and inclusiveness.” She argued

⁹ “Abantu Book Festival Shining Light on Black Voices,” CapeTalk, accessed April 19, 2020, <https://www.capetalk.co.za/articles/235502/abantu-book-festival-shining-light-on-black-voices>.

¹⁰ “Abantu Book Festival: Nothing Short of an Introspective Space – The Journalist,” accessed April 19, 2020, <https://www.thejournalist.org.za/spotlight/abantu-book-festival-nothing-short-of-an-introspective-space>.

¹¹ “Abantu Book Festival Shining Light on Black Voices.”

¹² Here I should explain that fallism movements are not only the student led movements, fallism movements traces from the first Black people who protested failure of service deliver in the townships, to the Marikana mineworkers, and the EFF and BLF. Student led Fallist movements presents us with a different kind of fallism. However, there have been many movements of fallism in the townships such as Abahlali BaseMojondolo and others. Even femicide movements like #MenAreTrash form part of the Fallists discourse.

that excluding “White people who read books by African authors and want to listen to these discussions seems counter-intuitive.” She pointed out that Abantu Festival is a social event that is educational – it is an exploration of Black literature and discussion, and excluding White people who need to hear these conversations was not revolutionary (Wazar, 2018).

However, Wazar’s summoning of a whole Black Festival, an Abantu pilgrimage to reconsider its focus on blackness was met with unkindness and refute. With its founder, Thando Mqgolozana, arguing that opening Abantu would further entrench whiteness at literary events;

“This issue of this so-called exclusion of White people is exactly what whiteness does. It centralises itself; that’s the success of colonisation... whiteness will always be the centre,” he said. “Each time it (the festival) gets bigger and better.... We’re talking about the so-called exclusion of White people and not the good things we’re doing.”¹³

Haji Mohamed Dawjee (2019) argued that if White liberals wanted to deal with the problem of White racism they should do it without dragging, and placing Black people at risk, and it must be a moral decision for their own sake to change things in society.¹⁴ While Athinangomso Nkopo (2019), in her paper on the cultural review responded in these words, “Nothing to see here: Abantu Book Festival for Blacks.”¹⁵

Nkopo’s response connected the decision of Abantu to be pro-Black to the Black Consciousness ancestors and Steve Biko. He argued that what is happening at Abantu is something that happened before:

At the 1969 AGM of the most radical elements in the White South African society, Nusas could not imagine contesting the Apartheid curfew in Grahamstown. A whole ‘no blacks outside’ law they could not rise to the challenge for and that sparked the birth of the blacks only SASO.

The same way today we have not seen White people protesting the White town called “Orania” or held any discussions about the building of pro-Afrikaners schools in

¹³ “Nothing Wrong with Book Festival for Black People, Says Event Founder,” accessed April 19, 2020, <https://www.iol.co.za/sundayindependent/news/nothing-wrong-with-book-festival-for-black-people-says-event-founder-19223398>.

¹⁴ Haji Mohamed Dawjee, “[OPINION] Abantu Book Festival and ‘let Whites in’ Argument,” accessed April 19, 2020, <https://ewn.co.za/2018/12/13/opinion-haji-mohamed-dawjee-abantu-book-festival-and-let-whites-in-argument>.

¹⁵ “CULTURE Review | Nothing To See Here: Abantu Book Festival For Blacks Only,” accessed April 19, 2020, <https://culture-review.co.za/nothing-to-see-here-abantu-book-festival-for-blacks-only>.

the city of Johannesburg. Rainbow South Africa with liberals at the helm and protagonist blacks like Desmond Tutu at the helm has failed the poor majority blacks. To be fair to the African National Congress (ANC), and Desmond Tutu, their rainbow nation failed because White people were unable to change. Therefore, the new generation felt that there is still a need for Black radical movement post-1994 and Abantu had become that for the Black people. While, the Black elites acquired more degrees, moving into professional management positions in public institution, thus having no interest in changing society, but only in managing it.

To unpack the Abantu decision to be pro-black, Nkopo further questioned what we think the Black radical movements were doing before 1994 when the BCM decided to choose to organise themselves as Black people? He argued that the Abantu Book Festival is only taking lessons from Biko that White supremacy has succeeded in developing complexities that entrench further blackness and whiteness:

- The mere presence of one among the other shifts the dynamics in a room and speech; thus, when this happened at Abantu, whatever gives power to the written in Abantu's case is completely taken over.
- Where Black people are concerned, the White gaze, whether we know of or acknowledge it, turns very salient and clear ideas in our minds into 'Askies, I'm sorry' in our speech.
- The relational structure of blackness and whiteness, the coherence given to whiteness by blackness 'I am Black because you are White,' means that White people have the power for speech while Black speech is always coerced.
- If whiteness is the interlocutor, a beneficiary to the internal conflict experienced by subordinated groups in an oppressive society, how much more then when conversing in White presence? In which case Black emotive expression is still under question when we think about Black literature and writing.
- How can a festival and movement born out of thinking about decolonising the literary space in this country not agonise about the possibility of creating spaces for the expressions of its thinkers, writers and readers?

Nkopo argued that to assert that political organisations and movements that are pro-Black are a "useless political move is a deliberate erasure of our history of more than 500 years" against slavery, colonialism and apartheid. The statement demonstrates that some have their political and ethical investments somewhere else but in the Black revolution. In concluding remarks, Nkopo argued that Mqgolozana never claimed to be starting a revolution but to begin an "exploration of a Decolonial project that tries to affirm the desires of Black people right through this continent."¹⁶ He argued that even if the Abantu Festival fails to decolonise education

¹⁶ "CULTURE Review | Nothing To See Here."

“through forms of anti-blackness that are internal even to black people. It is still acceptable because Abantu is also a space for healing, love and solidarity amongst Black in the diaspora.”¹⁷

Engaging the debate above, I want to argue that the need for Abantu to be pro-Black does not mean the exclusion of White people. The debate is not about White people versus Black people like how apartheid and apartheid theology was structured. As mentioned above, Abantu is about the healing of oppressed Black people. Thus, famous authors like Tsitsi Dangarembga who attended Abantu, have had to “hold back their tears, as they witnessed the healing power of providing a space that allows Black people to be themselves freely, with all their cultural idiosyncrasies”¹⁸ in a White world. In conclusion, therefore, I want to argue that one needs to see the pro-blackness at Abantu as not denying the need for openness to others, but as a space that “allows the lion freedom to roar without having to translate the roars to accommodate a foreign bystander. These spaces, therefore, validate the lion’s voice to other lions, empowering them to claim and own their stories as well.”¹⁹

3. Why Soweto is the Urban space for the Abantu Book festival?

The Abantu Book Festival takes place in the urban area called Soweto, situated in the city of Johannesburg. Johannesburg is known for its harsh inequalities, and it is amongst the most unequal metropolis in Africa. Johannesburg is historically known as a city of migrant workers from all over the world. With Black migrants condemned to reside in spaces such as Soweto with no access to land, water, and ownership of production.

Today, the challenges facing Soweto include the following: (see the diagram below)

The urban space in which Abantu Book Festival takes place annually used to be a labour reserve for the mines. In the 1970s, Soweto had become a gigantic slum with 25% of the population foreigners, while the rest of the people came from the Eastern Cape, and the North West province (Welsh, 2009).

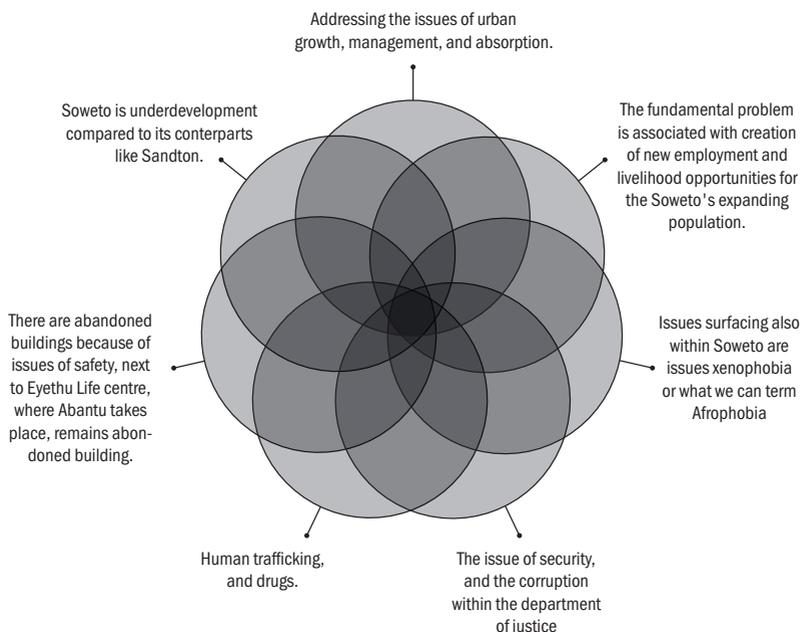
According to Welsh (2009:151), Soweto was the most significant urban area in the Black history of resistance. Anything that happened in Soweto had repercussions throughout Black urban regions in South Africa during apartheid.

However, personally, before I could apprehend this Black history. I heard about Soweto through my primary school teacher. In class, he used to sing songs about the Black migrants living in the city of Johannesburg, in urban spaces like Soweto, Alexandra, and others. My teacher’s songs narrated how Black migrant workers were forced

¹⁷ “CULTURE Review | Nothing To See Here.”

¹⁸ Festival rewrites colonial narrative and plots future of black literature (businesslive.co.za)

¹⁹ “Abantu Book Festival.”



to come to the city of Johannesburg through Teba. Teba was a recruitment agency that migrated people from all over the continent to work in the mines of Johannesburg.

The history of Teba goes back to 1902 when the Chamber of mines founded Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA) and the Native Recruiting Corporation (NRC) to obtain unskilled labour to work in the mines of Johannesburg. Many of South Africa's Black activists' and musicians composed songs about Teba and the experiences of mineworkers in the city of Johannesburg, and their living conditions in places like Soweto. These songs include songs like *Stimela* by Hugh Masekela and *Teba* by Stompie Mavi.

However, it was songs composed by the village composers that I first learnt about the Soweto Uprising of 1976. In these songs, Soweto was described as a township that had brave young people who challenged the apartheid government during the struggle for liberation in South Africa.

In 2016, it was in Soweto, in the city of Johannesburg that the Abantu Book Festival was inaugurated (Dlakavu, Ndelu & Matandela, 2016:105). A festival born from the student call for decolonisation took its first step in the township known as one that caused all the trouble for the apartheid government. The brutal death of schoolchildren like Hector Pieterse, Hastings Ndlovu and others had taken place in Soweto (Ndlovu, 2017).

One of my friends at Abantu, who is an author, Phehello Mofokeng, suggested that Soweto was a proper urban area to pilot a project like Abantu because Soweto carries so much history. He suggested that Soweto speaks to the consciousness of many Black people because Soweto is the heart of rebellion and revolution in South African history.

Of course, he was right because BCM's call for blacks to unite against the system received much attention in the country, but Soweto was where the BCM's leader piloted many projects. Ndlovu argues that the poverty in Soweto in the 1970s had blurred the boundaries between childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Ndlovu explains that Soweto always had "educational, epistemological and pedagogical influenced resistance through autonomous actions of parents and students."²⁰

Against, the above deliberations, I want to affirm that Black urban spaces have always had a direct influence on epistemologies that influenced resistance in everyday struggles of Black people across the world. However, more importantly, Black urban spaces have always influenced decolonial discourses in academia, for example, James Cone always argued that he never owned Black theology of liberation. His BTL project was influenced by the civil rights movements with its leaders Malcolm X, and Martin Luther.²¹

In fact, I want to argue that the importance of this study lies in the fact that though in academia there have always been scholars who took the project of decolonising education as important from the early 1900s until today. With scholars like A.C Jordan, Frantz Fanon, Paulo Freire, James Cone, Bell Hooks, Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Tinyiko Maluleke, Vuyani Vellem, Fundiswa Kobo and others. The Abantu Book Festival allows the audience and the different authors to engage and shape decolonisation of education together without making the decolonising project about only academics.

4. Abantu Book festival as an "archival fever" in African urban spaces

it is not enough for us to say we must tell our stories if we don't equally think about the enabling infrastructure that supports the generation of those stories. The infrastructure that enables the circulation of ideas and the flow of knowledge (Bakere-Yusuf, 2018).

In the story of Soweto as the epicentre of resistance, Black history, and culture, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, the publisher would argue that we should build a pipeline of knowl-

²⁰ Sifiso Mxolisi Ndlovu, *The Soweto Uprisings: Counter-Memories of June 1976*, Updated edition with new material added (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2017).

²¹ James H. Cone and Cornel West, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018).

edge that will run through our history to remind the next generation of Soweto in the past, present and future.

In 2018, at Abantu, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf stated that she loved ideas and stories and that she loved them because they change the content of our minds and transforms our worlds and the norms human beings live beneath. In her keynote, address she pointed out that her interests in African literary world were in the future simple because publishers, writers, poets and others help shape the future.

She argued that she agreed to be with Abantu because she is interested in distributing and helping shape the African archival future to become a global archive within the global metropolis.

Bakare-Yusuf argued that publishing was “essentially the work of archival creation and a potential tool for power and control.” It was a tool that can help to shape how Africans view themselves and how they made sense of the world in their urban life. Therefore, spaces like Abantu Festival are essential because they too have the potential to shape the future of education in Africa with not just the writers, and publishers, but the people who consume the work they write and publish.

She noted that given the success of the past 500 years of slavery, colonialism-apartheid “the African and Africana from Lagos to Los Angeles, Benin to Bahia probably oscillates between mourning and melancholia and we still struggling to shake it off.” Bakare-Yusuf (2018) pointed out that though it is, in fact, useful to mourn because “there is a recognition that there is a loss, a hurt or a wound that is necessary to recover from the loss.”

We must be careful of replacing mourning with melancholia because we move to a state of “mental disorder, and this may come with suicidal impulse.” She suggested that we must look at the archive that Abantu is trying to build as “reservoir of and for memory.” We must ask ourselves why it was necessary for this festival to be in Soweto, and how will it benefit the people of the surrounding in Soweto.

She argued that whether the archive is of literature, music, visual art, film, plastic art, buildings what she was interested in was that our archival does not come from publishing houses of the western metropolis. She argued that the African literary spaces needed to cut loose from its colonial ties, as it still relied on the colonial centres for its aesthetics, market, economics, relevance, affirmation and symbolic legitimacy. She said we must:

Think of the archive as a curation of knowledge, experience and worlds in the now, to help order a past for the purpose of the future. We have to understand that the archive and its curation is always caught up in regimes of power and control. (Bakere-Yusuf, 2018)

Bakere-Yusuf argued that the importance of spaces like Abantu is in how we can build an archival fever that does not look merely on the past and present. But it relies on how “think simultaneously as past, present, and future.” When our approach to knowledge of ourselves at Abantu begins to be like past, present and futuristic, we then can understand why there is a:

‘fundamental problem and an ontological injustice in our complicitous silence and tacit acceptance of English or any European language as inevitable medium of transmitting African writing across our linguistic difference.’ We will begin to understand, and value the work of people like Ngugi wa Thiongo in the past, in the present, and for the future (Bakare-Yusuf, 2018).

First, when we connect these things, we begin to argue for the importance of storytelling in our lives, and how these stories need to be told in our indigenous languages as Wa Thiongo once explained storytelling is not just about telling the story. It is from the drama of storytelling that children learn how to value words for their meaning and nuances.

Ngugi once argued that language was not just about a mere string of words, but it had suggestive power well beyond the immediate lexical meaning. This magical power of language is reinforced by riddles, proverbs, and this where transportations of syllabus take place. Moreover, it is through nonsensical but musically arranged words that we learnt the drama of the story. Through images and symbols that are given by the storyteller, we gain our worldviews (Ngugi, 1986). For instance, the African philosophy of Ubuntu is born from how, and what kind of stories African teach to their children. I will further elaborate this idea on the sections below.

Nonetheless, Bakare-Yusuf argued that the framing of African literature only in terms of the English metaphysical empire was not only a tragedy and an act of symbolic violence that we Africans perpetuate. She argued that there is a rupture in how African literature is periodised. That even Chinua Achebe when he was herald by the English empire as the father of African literature, he rejected the idea. Bakare-Yusuf argued that Achebe knew there were people like “Amos Tutuola who had published three books before him.” Even before, Amos, there was a South African writer called Thomas Mofolo who wrote in the 1800s. Even before then, “The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman, written by the Ethiopian emperor Galawdewos” existed (Bakare-Yusuf). Bakare-Yusuf pointed out that it is about time we discuss the missing literature in our literary spaces like Abantu. She argued that:

The systemising and the categorising of our literary tradition is wrong, there's a gap, a missing antecedent of writing in favour of writings and writers who pay homage to the metaphysics of English (Bakare-Yusuf, 2018)

Thirdly, Bakare-Yusuf argued in the 19th-century European linguistics took turns on Abantu languages from Shona to Swahili, Yoruba, Ewe for how these languages lacked sophistication and poetic imagination because they lacked gender pronouns, he and she. Europeans did not anticipate that in the 21st century people would be “looking to escape the prison-house of the gendered pronoun.” She argued that if Abantu literature, religion, philosophy and scientific knowledge were written in these non-gendered languages, what world would have developed in Africa? Abantu literature would have provided us with languages for those “trying to transcend gendered languages, instead of the current awkward “he,” “she,” “they,” and “ze,” or “name only.”²²

Bakare-Yusuf's address pointed out that for the archival of Abantu in Soweto, we needed to explore why African philosophers argue that Africans do not do gender, we need to ask, what informs ways of knowing in African culture, if Africans do not do gender, how then did they organise society in the past, and how can that be helpful today? In conclusion, she argued that if writers and publishers at Abantu have not started publishing in Abantu languages, they should begin exploring publishing them.

5. Black Theology of liberation post-1994

Theological education in Africa in the Black communities must take the responsibility and formulate in its own words, (its own language about the Black South African people's belief in God and the Christian faith within the context of their struggle and socio-economic conditions) their belief in God.²³

Influenced by the above quotation from Sandiswa Lerato Kobe that Black people must shape their own knowledge's, their own Christian faith within the context of socio-economic conditions. The research project focuses on Black and African theologians' works in academia. From the perspective of BTL, I want to argue that Bibi Bakare-Yusuf's lecture on how we can imagine Abantu into existence in an African metropolis intrigued me as Black theologian. But more importantly, the

²² “Archival Fever,” Dipsaus, accessed April 27, 2020, <https://www.dipsaus.org/exclusives-posts/2018/12/29/ihbijoa397wfc7xsghodvrl2l6wlvn>.

²³ “Black Theology of Liberation (Is It the) Thing of the Past? A Theological Reflection on Black Students' Experiences | Kobe | Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Missiology,” accessed June 11, 2019, <http://missionalia.journals.ac.za/pub/article/view/316/pdf>.

use of blackness as an interlocutor for healing, and transformation at the Abantu Book festival has influenced me to use Black theology of liberation as a theoretical framework for this article. Thus, the article focuses on the literature emerging from Black scholars who engage the Black condition in the world.

As mentioned above, James Cone's Black Power and Black Theology in the United States of America (US) had a direct impact on the development of BTL in Black urban areas through churches, and ministers. BTL's position from its inceptions was of decolonial theology, Cone (1977:150) always argued that BTL was old as the first African who rebelled against slavery and coloniality. As recent as Tinyiko Maluleke's argument that BTL had its intentions beyond the Christian church and the realm of western religion (Maluleke, 1998). If people did not comprehend that BTL was a public discourse, in its intent, we should have read Cone more careful when he argued that faith receives its meaning in relations with political justice. We should have paid more attention to the father of BTL in South Africa, Steve Biko, who argued that Christianity in Africa could not remain:

abstract and far removed from the people's environment problems. In order to be applicable, it must have meaning for them in their given situation. If they are oppressed people, it must have something to say about their oppression (Biko, 1978:59).

Biko, as one of the first BTL's students in South Africa, argued that BTL was a praxis-based interpretation of Christianity because it wanted to relate African and Africana people to God within the given context of their suffering. Biko argued that BTL shifts the emphasis of moral obligations to the commitment to eradicating all causes for pain. "From the death of children, starvation, outbreaks of epidemics in deprived areas, or the existence of thuggery and vandalism in Black urban neighbourhoods." BTL changes the emphasis from petty sins to major sins in society, thereby ceasing to teach people to suffer peacefully (Biko, 1979).

Biko argued that the things mentioned above were what Black ministers, Black theologians, and the Black church should engage as discourse if Christianity is to survive with Black people, particularly young people. He argued that there is no nation that "can win a battle without faith, and if our faith in our God is spoilt by our having to see Him through the eyes of the same people we are fighting against then there begins to be something wrong in that relationship." In his essay, *the church as seen by a young layman*, he reminded Black ministers and all Black people that "God was not in the habit of coming down from heaven to solve people's problem.

Through BTL, Black people must interrogate their oppression, find a way to address the question of justice, and liberation, therefore BTL engaged three theories

of oppression and liberation in South Africa.²⁴ Without getting into details into the three phrases of BTL what essential to say is that from then BTL adopted blackness as its interlocutor for its decolonial approach into theological education. BTL's decolonial approach emphasised that blackness was the only tool for liberation in the struggle for justice, which connects Abantu to BTL.

Tshaka and Makofane (2010:536) argued that since the dawn of the new democratic South Africa BTL had been marginalised from becoming mainstream theology. However, Tshaka and Makofane argue that the liberative paradigms remain relevant as the socio-economic conditions of Black people continued. As the old system of colonisation and apartheid remained but dressed in new garments of the Black political leadership of the ANC.

Boesak (2017) argued that Black churches in urban society still believed in White innocence that originates on the dominant ideologies of whiteness. Cultural power depended on the annihilation on the one hand, and assimilation on the other side and the culture of the subjugated Black people is always deemed worthless, compared to the culture of White people.²⁵ It is from this background that Vellem (2014) argued that there was a need for a spirituality of liberation that is in conversation with African religiosity—arguing that the African Initiated churches are the last hope for the spirituality of liberation that originates in African culture.²⁶ In 2018, responding to the student call for decolonisation, Vellem (2018:5) argued that BTL needed “to think beyond rethinking and repeating its tried and tested ways of responding to Black pain caused by racism and colonialism.” Instead, BTL needs to unthink the west by presenting and adopting African spiritualities as cognitive spirituality. He argued that this is why Mosala had long suggested that African theology is the spiritual ancestor of BTL because the spiritual foundation of blackness is outside the lethargic sleep of west of western theologies (Vellem, 2018:6).

Maluleke (2008) had long proposed that African theology and Black theology of liberation must take seriously African Spirituality (Religions) not to for assimilation into western theology, and Christianity, but for African Spirituality's own sake, and survival. Vellem argued that BTL must accept that it has expanded the contours of Christian faith, and it has sought other sources for the liberation of poor outside the

²⁴ The Black solidarity phase, Black solidarity-material phase, the non-racialist phase

²⁵ Allan Boesak, *Pharaohs on Both Sides of the Blood-Red Waters: Prophetic Critique of Empire ; Resistance, Justice, and the Power of the Hopeful Sizwe -- a Transatlantic Conversation* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2017).

²⁶ Though AIC's under a Black government have become nullified as they rally against the Black government without questions.

confines of orthodox Christian tools.²⁷ Thus, in this article, I argue that the Abantu Book Festival is where BTL is in action.

6. African Spirituality of Ubuntu

Moria for the woke blacks and umgidi weencwadi. Sometimes known as the ode to Yizo-Yizo: Abantu: The Return Baba!" (Nkopo, 2018).

From a Black theology of liberation womanist discourse, Fundiswa Kobo (2018) proposed that we must look into our own cultures as Africans for the spirituality of liberation that BTL needs to adopt. She argued that the interlocution of BTL must focus on creating dialogues between Black men and Black women, and I think that Abantu Book festival's focus on Black women provides such space in its programme.

Abantu Book Festival's description is already formulated within the context of African Spirituality, as many people argue it is *umgidi*. *Umgidi* is an isiXhosa word used to describe a traditional ceremony that celebrates life in the community, together with the living dead, while hoping for a bright future for the community.

Interestingly, Abantu is also associated and defined as a "Moria" (pilgrimage) of the Black people. Moria is a Sepedi word that Zionist Christian Church uses to describe spiritual gatherings. It is like a catholic saying, "I am going to attend a mass which celebrates the sacraments of the Eucharists." Therefore, I want to argue that for the very fact that the people who attend Abantu describes Abantu in the form of a spiritual gathering, Abantu demonstrates a way of spirituality grounded in Abantu culture and Black spirituality in the diaspora. With its sacraments being storytelling, in the form of written text, dance, poetry, film-making, folktales, and others. It is from this background that the article argues that the Abantu Book Festival (Abantu) held in Soweto annually is an appropriate space for church, and theologians to learn how they can decolonise theological education for urban realities in Africa. The use of *umgidi*, and *Moria* (pilgrimage) to define Abantu challenges BTL sought for a Black theology of liberation grounded in AIC's, and African Spirituality because Abantu already performs such spirituality.

Abantu demonstrates that African women philosophers like Bibi Bakare-Yusuf are correct to argue against approaches to African discourses that monotheistic (based on Christian religion) but must be based in polytheistic (African spirituality).

²⁷ Vuyani S. Vellem, "Un-Thinking the West: The Spirit of Doing Black Theology of Liberation in Decolonial Times," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 73, no. 3 (February 8, 2017): 9 pages, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4737>.

Bakare-Yusuf argues that Africans need to acknowledge that though Africa in a colonial world is occupied by Christian and Islamic faith. The deep structure in Africa remains polytheistic and ordered by the spirit world of the traditional gods. These traditional gods structure reveals itself through aesthetic practices like storytelling, dance, poetry music and everyday life.²⁸ Bakare-Yusuf explained that most of African society operates in polytheistic belief structures; for instance, if one reflects in the Yoruba society. One would find out that Yoruba society resembles inter-relational and multiplicitous power structures. 'There is no dominant line of power on truth but shifting constellation of forces of capability and restraints. Truth becomes a "mobile army of metaphors." Which means at the level of discourse, single interpretation cannot dominate at the level of lived reality, enabling and constraining forces are always in contestation with each other.'²⁹

Therefore, Abantu culture as polytheistic presents a critical relation to Black discourses, not only accepting one mode of speech representation but that discussions themselves should be examined to work out if they themselves are concealing symbolic violence or are ideologically motivated. She argued that polytheism helps to explain how 'African society absorbed and absorbs change, difference rather how it excludes, therefore allowing to move beyond the ultimate truth paradigm than is usually inherited from European exceptionalism.'³⁰

Then we begin to understand that in African Spirituality; the social, and political organisation is interwoven within traditional religion (spirituality). The living dead (ancestors), in the African society, have a very significant and important space which includes the organisation of society, passing on the ethical directives to the next generations. In fact, everyday life circles around the meaning and the role indigenous Africans ascribe to the living dead or the spirits (Mbiti, 1960s; Ramose, 2009).

Mogobe Ramose (2009:5), for example, argued that to understand the African philosophy of Ubuntu, we must realise that 'Spirituality in the Abantu (African) society permeates the life of the people that it regulates their doings and governs their leisure's to the extent that cannot be imagined.'³¹ Henceforth, Bakare-Yusuf proposed that for Abantu to imagine themselves into existence in African metropolis, activities at Abantu Book Festival must think simultaneously past, present, and

²⁸ Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, "YORUBA'S DON'T DO GENDER': A CRITICAL REVIEW OF OYERONKE OYEWUMI's *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* By," 2015.

²⁹ Bakare-Yusuf.

³⁰ Bakare-Yusuf.

³¹ Bewaji, J., A., I., & Ramose, M., B., "The Bewaji, Van Binsbergen and Ramose Debate on 'Ubuntu,'" *South African Journal of Philosophy* 22, no. 4 (2003): 378-414, <https://philpapers.org/s/%20Van%20Binsbergen%20and%20Ramose>.

future. Abantu must be a “reservoir of and for memory” in its approach. It must bring together people like Mama Gcina Mhlophe, who specialises in African folktale in pre-colonial, with storytellers in colonial Africa.

If theological education in Africa explores Abantu as a reservoir of and for memory, we will explore Abantu as space where we could learn new ways of being Black in post-1994, as young people reflect on Black experiences, and suffering through literary work. When Abantu is a reservoir of memory, we will begin to understand as Black liberation theologians that African storytelling forms part of moral and ethical reflections.

As mentioned above, in his discussion on education, and the search for the decolonisation of knowledge in African universities Ng g wa Thiong’ o states that we must interrogate African mythologies, legends, and customs, rituals.

He argued there are reasons why African stories were mostly around animals as main characters. That the Hare, being small, weak but full of innovative wit and cunning, was the hero in children’s folktales. So, children can identify with the Hare (who is small) as he struggled against the Brutus of prey like lion, leopard, hyena. Wa Thiong’o argues that as children, the victories of the Hare were often their victories. It is from these stories that they learnt that the weak could outwit the strong. We will realise that African storytelling followed the animals in their struggles against hostile nature and other animals because these stories reflect real-life struggles in the human world.³²

We would understand why there were human-centred narratives also, which had two types of characteristics namely; the species of human beings with qualities of courage, kindness, mercy, hatred of evil, concern for others. Secondly, there was man eat man two mouthed species with qualities of greed, selfishness, individualism and hatred of what was good for the broader co-operative community. Wa Thiong’o explained that in stories that were human-centred; co-operation as the ultimate good in the society was a constant theme. It would unite human beings with animals against ogres and beasts of prey. When we critically analyse these stories, we realise that these stories were about ecology, and how the whole of creation is in relationship with humanity against the beast of prey.³³

We begin to see that the human-centred stories were trying to teach children about Ubuntu as everything good for society was defined in relation to how it affects the whole community, including animals, the environment, the living dead. Evil was described as greed, selfishness, individualism and hatred of what was good for the

³² Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London : Portsmouth, N.H: J. Currey ; Heinemann, 1986).

³³ Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o.

broader co-operative community. Perhaps, we would begin to explore if human-centred stories were not about capitalism and colonialism.

Analysing the Black cultural revolution in Africa, we could have asked why Pan Africanist leaders like Kwame Nkrumah, Leopold Senghor, Kenneth Kaunda and others argued for “Re-Africanisation.” Moreover, why did they formulate political ideologies that consist of traditional African humanist or social values? Perhaps we would have discovered like Christian Gade (2015) that Ubuntu in textual writing, is structured within narratives of return. Pan Africanist leaders taught these narratives of return within the context for social transformation together with academics, political leaders, and others attempting to identify pre-colonial values that can inspire politics and life in the future.

For instance, the Zimbabwean philosopher Samkange, in the Zimbabwean transitional period, argued that the Zimbabwean society must utilise a philosophy or ideology that is indigenous pre-colonial, in which he proposed “Hunhuism or Ubuntuism.” We never perhaps even asked why ordinary Black people in South Africa argued that:

When White people came to our country, they had the Bible, and we (Blacks) had the land. They said, ‘let us pray’ and we closed our eyes to pray. At the end of the prayer, they (Whites) had the land, and we had the Bible.³⁴

We never considered that perhaps it is because Hunhuism worldview does not allow that western ideas of private land ownership erode the African ideals of communal land ownership.

That Africans taught Ubuntu as a philosophy that allows us a backward forward-looking since the thinking behind the narratives of return is the idea that for us to create a good future, society needs to return to something African which does not stem from the colonial times.

Today in liberation theologies, we promote Ujamaa as a praxis-based approach in theological education. However, we do not connect this praxis-based approach to Julius Nyerere’s socialism. Gade argues that for Nyerere Africa could achieve the cultural revolution if purposefully, we returned to traditional socialism.³⁵

He argued that for the African what is essential is not the word “socialism”, but “African” which can be termed as Bantu (which is Abantu) considering Credo Mutwa’s *Indaba my children: African Tribal History, Legends, Customs and Religious beliefs*.³⁶

³⁴ Tinyiko Maluleke, “Black Theology as Public Discourse,” n.d., 3.

³⁵ Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, “African Traditional Religions in Christian Mission and Christian Scholarship: Re-Opening a Debate That Never Started,” *Religion and Theology* 5, no. 2 (1998): 121-37, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157430198X00011>.

³⁶ Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa, *Indaba, My Children: African Tribal History, Legends, Customs and Reli-*

Nyerere argued that for Abantu, there is no need to convert to socialism or democracy since Abantu's own traditional experience is socialist and democratic. Therefore, since Abantu's personal traditional experience is socialist and democratic, the real African socialist does not look at one class of human beings as his brethren and another as his natural enemies. He/she regards all humanity as his brethren-as members of his ever-extending family. From the viewpoint of the traditional African family, Nyerere introduced African socialism as *ujamaa* (in Swahili *ujamaa* means familyhood).

Nyerere argued for African socialism which was based in pre-colonial Africa but directed towards the future. Returning to the past, to reclaim sources, interrogating them for the future. *Ujamaa* meant first, the creation of a new society, a nation based on the traditional model of the family which is extended family. For Nyerere, the socialist project is directly informed by the Abantu traditional family, and therefore it implied constant development of communal living for Abantu. If one reads in between the lines, one would realise that *Ujamaa* is Ubuntu in praxis. *Ujamaa* is informed by Ubuntu principles that emanate from understanding African (Bantu) familyhood.³⁷

Nyerere, like Biko, rejected capitalism which seeks to build a peaceful society based on the exploitation of human beings. However, he also dismissed a doctrine of socialism, which aims to strengthen its peaceful community on a philosophy of inevitable conflict between "human beings." Interestingly, in South Africa, the descriptions of Ubuntu, healing, and transformation stand in contrast with other African pan Africanist leaders. In South Africa, Ubuntu was not used to forge an identity for everyday life. But a political strategy to contain gross human rights violations, and grant amnesty to perpetrators of gross human rights violations as the TRC celebrated acts of forgiveness moments of Ubuntu, and those who dared not to forgive as not embodiments of Ubuntu Krog.³⁸

7. In conclusion,

Abantu is a church informed and grounded in African culture, and blackness. It accommodates all faith communities: Christianity, Muslim, and African spirituality and others. Abantu helps articulate what it means to live in a colonial system, yet, it's continental and diasporic approach harmonises the relationship between

gious Beliefs (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1964).

³⁷ CHRISTIAN B. N. GADE, DISCOURSE ON AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY: A New Perspective on Ubuntu and Transitional Justice in South Africa. (LANHAM: LEXINGTON BOOKS, 2020).

³⁸ Antjie Krog, N. L. Mpolweni-Zantsi, and Kopano Ratele, There Was This Goat: Investigating the Truth Commission Testimony of Notrose Nobomvu Konile (Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009).

Africans in the world as African urban spaces are characterised by xenophobia. In addition, having Black authors, poets, filmmakers, intellectuals, Black business, and other professionals writing themselves into history through their participation at Abantu Book festivals helps children in Soweto to dream differently. While, in the literary world, Abantu is breaking barriers and igniting mission as it attracts different people, from the surroundings of Gauteng to Cape Town, Lagos, London, Caribbean. In its approach to focus on women as leaders in African conversations and problems helps to place women at the centre regarding African issues. Abantu offers transformative healing as conversations between Black men and women become the order of the day. Abantu is one of the very few times that Black people gather to talk about their healing without having to explain why they need healing. Black people at Abantu do not need to legitimise their pain, Abantu Book festival is the time in which Black people become sane, knowing that Black people are still living in oppressive systems of coloniality, but also becoming agents of their own liberation. The festival had become a platform that disturbed the dominant narrative on the industry of distributors, editors, publishers in the literary work in South Africa.

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