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# Liberation Song in a New Key: Musicking Against Neoliberal Abandonment and Racialised Inequality

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## ABSTRACT

We discuss three examples of what we call liberation songs in a new key in South Africa. Such liberation songs address the gap between the visions of freedom that animated the liberation struggle and the gross racialised inequality that impedes a deepening of freedom and democracy in South Africa. Introducing the concept of organised abandonment to capture the culture of state neglect that reproduces racialised inequality, we show how songs by Thandiswa Mazwai, Mandisi Dyantyi and Malcolm Jiyane Tree-O not only express critique, but also facilitate tying such critique to shared emotions. What we call ‘the art world of the liberation song’ is a crucial arena for discussing, opposing, and reproducing locally specific and transnational cultural understandings that shape expectations about political actions’ desirability and feasibility.

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## Introduction

The 30 years after South Africa’s democratic transition are increasingly seen as a disappointment because they have not yielded the equality those who fought for freedom and against apartheid envisioned. Social scientists argue that establishing a more egalitarian democracy requires fundamentally changing South African society and economy (Friedman 2021; Von Holdt 2013). Cultural understandings that shape often racialised expectations about desirable and feasible political actions restrain – but also potentially enable – such fundamental change (Teeger 2024). What we call ‘the art world of the liberation song’ is a crucial arena for discussing, opposing and reproducing locally specific and transnational cultural understandings in South Africa. Social critique in this art world is aesthetic and emotional as song facilitates such expression. In this regard, it can be delineated from critique based on syllogistic reasoning. The art world metaphor, which we borrow from Howard Becker (1982), emphasises that the composition, performance and meaning of liberation songs emerge through cooperation.

The art world of the liberation song has undergone a profound change. This is what we mean by liberation song in a new key. Unlike classic liberation songs, composed before

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1994, contemporary works address the tension between the aspirations of a majority of South Africans during the struggle against apartheid and the disappointments that set in about a decade after the democratic transition. We second what Kelwyn Sole (2008, 141) notes in relation to poetry, namely, that 'liberation in South Africa occasioned expectations that the future would be immeasurably better than the past'. Liberation today connotes unfulfilled hopes. While a small stratum of Black people acquired middle-class status and wealth, the majority of those who were disenfranchised prior to 1994 suffer from the highly unequal distribution of wealth and life chances. One of our interviewees characterised this disappointment: *'We voted in 1994 and other years after, but we are still living in shacks. So, it means that our vote is taken for granted, our vote doesn't have a meaning'* (interview, Yoleka Mfana, 18 March 2024). Certainly, in present-day South Africa, those people who were historically excluded (based on racist apartheid categorisations) are no longer forbidden to carry out skilled professions. The many in South Africa are no longer disenfranchised on the basis of racial categories after the end of white minority rule (Friedman 2021). A musician we interviewed expressed this change: *'The fact that we can walk into malls and hospitals and down the street and go to movies, that [all] children can go to school and they're not being bombed [...] there is something to be grateful for to just be in this environment – as fraught as it is'* (interview, Nika Gxaka, 15 March 2024).

As examples of this new way of rallying for freedom, we discuss *Zabalaza* by the South African pop star Thandiswa Mazwai, *Ziyafana* by the popular jazz trumpeter Mandisi Dyantyi and *Life Esidimeni* by the jazz combo Malcolm Jiyane Tree-O. These contemporary liberation songs capture the disappointment about the democratic transition – yet also the hope that quite ordinary people may unite once again to fight for a better life. In South Africa, this notion of a better life is widely associated with Azania, a pan-African vision of a liberated space for Black people. Azania was central to the #Rhodes-MustFall/#FeesMustFall protests (Daniel & Platzky Miller 2022; Gunner 2015). These protests popularised a counternarrative to the internationally circulating success story of the democratic transition. The counternarrative questions that the settlement between the white supremacist National Party and the African National Congress would have consolidated a democracy characterised by racial and socio-economic equality (Teeger 2024). What is more, it conveys that the democratic compromise of the early 1990s, culminating in the 1994 Constitution and free elections, did not end the long history of exploitation and exclusion (Von Holdt 2013). This counternarrative identifies corruption – that is, informal ties and illegal private gain from public funds – as having been integral to the white minority rule of the National Party (Friedman 2021). Thus, it highlights that corruption is not a new phenomenon that set in with the democratic transition – as often suggested in media reports – but is a legacy of white minority rule.

Our claim that liberation song is still alive, though in a new key, builds on Grant Olwage's work. According to him, liberation song outlived apartheid in its 'thin understanding' (Olwage 2008, 1), referring to the apartheid period coinciding with the racist and authoritarian rule of the National Party from 1948 to 1994. A 'thick understanding' of apartheid, in contrast, means to acknowledge the degree to which the National Party's white minority rule rested on racist forms of oppression, colonial violence and exploitation that preceded it. The liberation songs we discuss popularise such thick understandings of apartheid by highlighting that 'some of its [apartheid's] realities

persist after its dethroning' (Olwage 2008, 1). They point to the fact that the majority of Black people remained economically and socially excluded after 1994. Following Steve Biko's political understanding of Blackness, we understand Black people to be all those who did not qualify as white during apartheid rule.<sup>1</sup> This article addresses liberation song as a widely shared aesthetic and emotional mode of critique that highlights the persistence of racialised inequality in South Africa.

Racialised inequality (Beeman, Glasberg & Casey 2011) in South Africa is often seen as resulting from structural violence (see, for example, Govender 2022). Because of the difficulty in operationalising structural violence, we suggest the concept of organised abandonment as an alternative. This concept facilitates identifying concrete institutions and actors that create the very policies that reproduce racialised inequality. Unlike structural violence, organised abandonment identifies a culture of state neglect. Such state neglect is endemic to neoliberal restructuring in many parts of the world (Gilmore 2023). The neoliberal identification of macroeconomic growth as the *sine qua non* of a good life for the many justifies the downsizing of institutions of public care. As Wendy Brown (2015, 84) argues: 'when individuals, firms, or industries constitute a drag on this good [macroeconomic growth], rather than a contribution to it, they may be legitimately cast off or reconfigured'. A de-responsibilisation of state organs accompanies the responsabilisation of individual citizens, that is, 'forcing the subject to become a responsible self-investor and self-provider' (Brown 2015, 84). The more citizens are regarded as responsible to provide for healthcare, old age, education or basic infrastructure on an individual basis, the easier for politicians to avert responsibility for poverty and premature death. Neoliberal cultural understandings shift responsibility away from the state or the political collective. They naturalise inequality transnationally by categorising people as either deserving or undeserving (Schwenck 2024). In combination with narratives that distance South Africa's racist past (Teeger 2024), such neoliberal understandings legitimate the culture of state neglect that Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls organised abandonment.

We find an in-depth discussion of liberation song in a new key to be warranted by its potential to question such responsabilisation of the individual in music scenes (Futrell, Simi & Gottschalk 2006), social movements and the wider society. Liberation song is a powerful cultural resource, as it calls upon people to hold state actors accountable for organised abandonment. It is therefore essential for breaking with the expected behaviour of the responsabilised citizen that Brown (2015, 213) characterises as tolerating 'insecurity, deprivation, and extreme exposure to maintain the competitive positioning, growth, or credit rating of the nation as firm'. Not only do responsabilised citizens tend to deflect critique from higher echelons of power, for instance, by joining in the choir of voices that individualise, dehistoricise and depoliticise the blame for poverty and deprivation (Schwenck 2024, 190). By tolerating or even embracing neoliberal cultural understandings, they also justify inequality. 'Liberation song in a new key popularises the need to render the state, economic elites and political decisionmakers responsible for organised abandonment.

Liberation song in a new key expresses impatience with neoliberal policies, yet it also provides a means for grieving together and raising hope for a better future. As James Jasper (1998, 405) reminds us, initiating collective action depends on shared emotions, as there 'would be no social movements if we did not have emotional responses to developments near and far'. Song can tie cognitive critique to grievances. It is a cultural resource for mobilisation. In the South African case, liberation song is especially powerful,

because its symbolism ties the post-1994 fight against racialised inequality to the collective fight against apartheid.

Our article is structured as follows: after discussing our case selection, that is, the songs and their performers, we explicate the relevance of liberation song for South African politics and society. We then introduce the concept of organised abandonment and exemplify, through the *Life Esidimeni* case, how it plays out in South Africa. *Life Esidimeni* denotes the events that led to the relocation of patients from psychiatric care facilities that resulted in enormous suffering and the premature death of 144 people. Turning to discuss liberation song in a new key, we first show how the concept of *zabalaza*, translating as ‘to rebel’ or ‘to struggle’, changes its meaning in liberation song between the early 1990s and the mid-2000s. To do so we undertake a comparative analysis of three songs – all titled *Zabalaza* – performed by the jazz icon and liberation activist Hugh Masekela (1), the kwaito combo Brothers of Peace (2), and the South African pop star and activist Thandiswa Mazwai (3). We find that Thandiswa Mazwai’s *Zabalaza* is the first to communicate a break away from the notion that the 1994 transition set in a process that would end racialised inequality in South Africa. We then turn to Mandisi Dyantyi’s song *Ziyafana*, which invites audiences to partake in prophesising a popular uprising. Malcolm Jiyane Tree-O’s preponderantly instrumental *Life Esidimeni* is our last example. Taking the musical form of lament, *Life Esidimeni* facilitates transcending grief. As these examples illustrate, played in a new key, liberation song is a cultural resource that may (re-)build trust in collective strength in neoliberal times and offer consolation for the victims of state neglect through shared mourning. This function seems to be heightened in situations of musicking – performative situations in which the differentiation between performer and audience becomes arbitrary (Small 1998).

### Case selection: Political song and professional art

We hold that liberation song in a new key is an art form. By art, we mean a collectively created aesthetic situation that facilitates somatic, political and social experimentation. This situation potentially engenders cognitive and emotional reflection on the world among those who experience it.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, we analyse how liberation song shapes street protest and parliamentary politics (Brand-Marais, May & Schwenck 2024). Here, in contrast, we focus on songs composed and performed by professional musicians who conceive of themselves as artists.

The songs we discuss in this article are works of art that are intended to bear political meaning. Because of this dual function they cut across dominant categorisations delineating music from politics. While the songs we discuss do identify tangible political objectives that go beyond prefiguring an ideal future, they are not employed to increase electoral gains (compare Green & Street 2018). They, too, blur the often invoked boundary between music as art and music as social activism. None of the songs was created in opposition to the institutional art world, a trait that allegedly indicates a song’s activist quality (compare Serafini 2018). Professional musicians in the classic sense of the term, that is, people who conceive of themselves and whom others identify as artists, wrote and perform the works we analyse in subsequent sections.

While all three musicians whose songs we discuss identify as professional musicians, the degree to which they conceive of themselves as activists varies. Thandiswa Mazwai

conceives of herself as both a musician and an activist. 'I think the role of the artist is to use their gifts intentionally to free people from suffering' (Chutel 2025). Like Thandiswa Mazwai, Mandisi Dyantyi understands himself as continuing the tradition of anti-apartheid political song (Real Wired Music 2021). To our knowledge, Malcolm Jiyane Tree-O has not been directly invoking such an activist lineage, though the choice of song titles, such as *Ntate Gwangwa* or *Life Esidimeni*, and venues, such as Chimurenga in Cape Town, clearly bespeaks this tradition.

The reason that the songs we discuss blur often invoked conceptual boundaries between music and activism might lie in the significant role that both political song and musicians played in the international fight against apartheid. Within South Africa, but also for musicians in exile, there was little meaning in drawing strict boundaries between liberation songs and songs mainly written for entertainment (Schumann 2008). Unlike elsewhere, musical celebrities performing in institutionalised art sectors identified as activist advocates for racial justice. The musical careers of many were deeply intertwined with activism. Among the most prominent is certainly the singer Miriam Makeba, who stated in a 1976 interview: 'I could not afford the luxury of just being a singer who sings about happy things and love' (cited by Schumann 2008, 28). Other celebrity musicians such as Hugh Masekela, when in exile, communicated to international audiences through song how racist politics created immense suffering within South Africa, thereby contributing to transnational solidarity networks against apartheid (Hashachar 2018; Levi 2018; Weaver 2015). The international musical campaigns against apartheid fully used the symbolic capital of celebrities who, due to their stardom, 'provide models of individual participation, related choices and intentions, and justify the action's legitimacy, practicability and efficiency' (Lahusen 1996, 368).

We selected cases that bespeak the intrinsic quality of the liberation song in a new key: all songs address the tension between anti-apartheid aspirations and current politico-economic realities. Our selection of these songs was shaped by our participation in a collective research group studying liberation song as part of the project 'African Music and Politics: Negotiations of Violence in South African Popular Music'. The research group members' familiarity with and knowledge of South African music scenes influenced the selection. The opportunities to attend live concerts of specific musicians in Cape Town during the duration of the project (from 2022 to 2024) further guided our choice of songs as we favored the study of musical performance over the analysis of lyrics.

For this article, we chose songs that differ aesthetically: Mazwai's *Zabalaza* builds on her earlier involvement in kwaito combos, kwaito being a specific South African genre influenced by house music. It affords dance moves, and the vocals are, at times, reminiscent of soul and hip hop. *Ziyafana* mixes jazz and *amagwijo* – a style of song related to isiXhosa cultural traditions – and is dominated by singing. In contrast, *Life Esidimeni* is largely instrumental. It features only two lines of lyrics that are sung after about eight minutes of jazz improvisations.

We are aware that examples from crucial genres, such as spaza hip-hop or *amapiano*, are missing from this selection. Likewise, pieces by musicians such as Msaki, Tumi Mogorosi or Nduduzo Makhathini could have been featured in this article. Another limitation of our case selection is that acts more common at venues catering to working class audiences – such as Guga S'thebe Cultural Centre in Langa, Kwa Sec in Gugulethu or Jazz in the Native Yards and Rands in Khayelitsha – might be as relevant to liberation song as

the examples discussed here. These selection biases notwithstanding, we hope that our article can serve as a starting point for further investigations into new-key liberation song.

## Liberation song in South Africa

The typical, and perhaps the most potent, liberation songs are those sung on the ground in the streets when South Africans voice their dissatisfaction with the status quo. They draw on a liberation archive providing a long lineage.

Liberation songs adhere to the cultural heritage of Black South Africans in their various ethnicities. In their study of isiXhosa songs, Benjamin Izu and Alethea de Villiers (2021) argue that performances of traditional African music communicate societal values and knowledge within a community. Traditional Xhosa music was a medium for learning about the history and cultural traditions of the Xhosa people (Izu & De Villiers 2021). In the context of the broader liberation struggle, isiZulu, isiXhosa and seSotho songs dominate the archive of liberation songs (Gunner 2015), as these are the languages most widely spoken in South Africa.<sup>3</sup> In Cape Town, for instance, where our research group attended live concerts, there are more isiXhosa speakers than any other speakers of Black South African languages. Many of the songs we encountered have isiXhosa lyrics. Even though we find liberation song to represent a civic, not an ethnic, tradition, the meaning of liberation song is tied to a cultural song tradition (see also Brand-Maraïs et al. 2024). The concept of cultural tradition indicates that song is symbolically and socially powerful before it enters and shapes political contestation. The reason for this pre-political power anchoring in everyday practices is neither to be attributed in an essentialist manner to either African or Black people's musicality or enhanced rhythmic perception (Agawu 1992; Bruinders 2024), nor to the specific sound of African music in and by itself. Rather, music and the significance of songs in southern African culture and political mobilisation lie in 'what people do with music', to borrow Tia DeNora's (2000) influential expression.

Thus, we argue with DeNora that music and dance become a cultural and political resource due to repeated collective performance (Brand-Maraïs et al. 2024). Familiarity with genres, motifs and keys are a result of collective learning processes that determine the scope of music's symbolic and social power (Lahusen 1991). The greater role that certain music, genres, songs and motifs play in the everyday interactions of specific constituencies, the greater their potential effect when they enter political organising. Indeed, many liberation songs, which activists often compose jointly (Jolaosho 2019), draw on melodies, rhythms and sometimes lyrics from what we call a cultural song tradition.

There is a significant relationship between the sonic (vocally) and the rhythmic (bodily) in the structure of liberation song. Liberation song in itself is a call to action. It is always deployed with a purpose. Lukhanyo May's (2019) reading of the song *Senzeni Na?* as a two-folded message illuminates this relationship of the vocally and the bodily. He agrees with the popular reading of *Senzeni Na?* as a rhetorical question (what have we done?) that Black people posed to the apartheid regime. Anne-Marie Gray (2004) argues that *Senzeni Na?* reflects a period when the regime was intensifying its crackdown on the liberation movement that had shifted to adopting militant tactics to counter apartheid. May (2019) introduces a subtle and overlooked meaning to the question(s) posed by the song. He posits that *Senzeni Na?* can also be read as 'what should we do?' In this

interpretation, the question posed still reads as *senzeni na?*; however, it takes a much more active form. May asserts that 'this move away from the passive and self-pity of what have we done, is what made the song powerful for the context of #FeesMustFall – what is to be done, demands a way forward from those the question is posed to and to those posing it' (2019, 36). It is a call to action of the protesters to each other: What is to be done about the treatment they are receiving from the state and public institutions? This question incites action about the cruel and unfair treatment they are receiving, thus inviting the body in that moment to a public demonstration of their intentions.

Liberation song is widely known as a means to mobilise and organise in South Africa (see also Brand-Marais et al. 2024). For those in power, liberation song can be unsettling as the possibility of political unrest lurks behind the clapping hands and stamping feet accompanying songs. For South Africa's white society, a liberation song can amount to a reminder about the notion of the *swart gevaar*, the 'Black danger' (Alexander 2000, 268). The National Party planted the idea of Black danger to convey that the majority Black South African population posed a danger to the minority white South African population. In his piece 'They Were Black and Loud', Vusumzi Nkomo highlights the continuing effect of liberation song, eliciting notions of Black danger:

White civil society is a community of fear, in fear. At the centre of this fear (which sits at the centre of Settlement), is the fear of Black people in groups, singing. But there is a particular kind of singing that horrifies this community. The most 'politically aware' in this community identify these songs as Struggle Songs, or a 'Toyi-Toyi(ng)'. This [the equation of singing Black people with *swart gevaar*] happens even when the songs have nothing to do with radicalism so often associated with the 'Struggle' (Nkomo, 2022).

As many classic liberation songs refer to the collision of the Black and the white society during apartheid and colonisation, and the trauma Black people suffered, collective singing of liberation song may well arouse fear among different South African constituencies (see also Brand-Marais et al. 2024). Political actors employ such actual or apparent fear associated with song strategically to reactivate the idea of a *swart gevaar*. The chant *Dubul'ibhunu*, for instance, has been the subject of multiple court cases over the previous decade. Disputes occurred between the conservative civil society organisation AfriForum and the leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters party, Julius Malema, who transformed the chant into his signature tune. The courts deemed that the singing of the chant was a matter of freedom of speech. Malema was therefore not found guilty of instigating violence and racial hatred (*AfriForum v Economic Freedom Fighters* 2024). As Liz Gunner (2015) highlights, *Dubul'ibhunu* allowed Malema to be in dialogue with the state after he had been expelled from the African National Congress. Malema was at the time, through his new party, carving 'new positions vis-a-vis economic policy and the urgent question of the poor and the marginalised, who were often the youth' (Gunner 2015, 328).

Julius Malema instrumentalises liberation song to inscribe himself into the history of the liberation struggle and win votes. Notably, at the same time, the very idea of fighting for *economic* freedom, which underlies the founding of his party, responds to the thick understanding of apartheid that animates today's revival of liberation song in a new key. Fighting for *economic* equality to facilitate a deepening of freedom directly relates to the unfulfilled hopes for equality. Thus, performances and recordings of classic liberation songs 30 years *after* the democratic transition may well symbolise that

liberation, in the way it had been envisioned, has not been achieved until today. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that the Economic Freedom Fighters are among the most vocal producers and advocates of the classic liberation song in the form of recordings and public musical and protest performances. As Gunner suggests, the Economic Freedom Fighters' political objectives voiced through classic liberation song, as those of their supporters, should not be reduced to a scramble for electoral gains. They also express disagreement with the severe racialised inequality and a call for profound changes in economic and social policies.

### **Organised abandonment, political song and *Life Esidimeni***

The concept of organised abandonment captures the state neglect that sustains racialised inequality in South Africa. The Marxist geographer David Harvey first used the concept to criticise municipalities' and states' systematic abandonment of districts and locales (Harvey 1984). Following in his footsteps, fellow Marxist geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2023), employed the concept to theorise the neoliberal restructuring that spread transnationally especially after the demise of the Soviet Union.

Organised abandonment did not originate as a critical concept though. In the early 1990s, Peter Drucker, a consultant who taught at New York University, introduced the term to new management literature appropriating economist Joseph Schumpeter's notion of creative destruction. Organised abandonment was to Drucker the superior guiding principle for successfully managing all kinds of organisations, not only economic ones (1993). Similarly, he identified the free market to be the only mechanism facilitating both economic and social progress (Drucker 1993).

The view that mechanisms such as creative destruction and organised abandonment are beneficial in sectors that were heretofore not guided by free market ideas is propelled by these mechanisms' progressive reputation. Sociologists Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy (2024) argue that with the advance of social media and smart solutions creative destruction became increasingly identified with moral progress. Creative destruction is regarded to be driving both economic and moral advance (Acemoglu & Robinson 2013; for a critical view, see Friedman 2021). This explains why, despite their anti-humanistic pedigree, creative destruction and organised abandonment find support transnationally among elites who are politically liberal and support democracy.

The neoliberal worldview giving rise to organised abandonment champions innovation at the expense of everything that is, or appears to be, routine or familiar. As sociologist Richard Sennett (2006) argues, ideals of continuous change, flexibility and dynamism became hegemonic in the 1990s and transcended the boundaries of economics. Today, innovativeness serves as a benchmark for good governance and research in sectors as distant from the economy as healthcare and education (Sennett 2006). As a critical, historically reflexive concept, organised abandonment denotes a neoliberal logic that structures how the state and its organs operate (Gilmore 2023).

An event that has come to symbolise the failures of the post-apartheid state in South Africa and exemplifies organised abandonment is the hurried relocation of patients from psychiatric facilities the healthcare provider Life Esidimeni administrated. It resulted in the severe suffering of most of the relocated patients and the death of 144 people. Life Esidimeni<sup>4</sup> is a subsidiary of the still operating Life Healthcare group that ran highly

specialised chronic psychiatric care facilities on the basis of contracts with the Gauteng Department of Health.<sup>5</sup> In 2015, the Health Department announced a reform that was to facilitate a more humane and less costly care for the Life Esidimeni patients. This would be achieved by relocating them to small, decentralised facilities, a practice called deinstitutionalisation. The guiding idea of deinstitutionalisation is that inhabitants of specialised institutions, such as psychiatric hospitals, receive more adequate care in community-based homes. Deinstitutionalisation has thus a reputation of counteracting human rights violations and poor treatment in long-stay psychiatric institutions (WHO/Regional Office for South-East Asia 2024). In this vein, the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities acknowledges and promotes that people with psychosocial disabilities enjoy the right to living autonomously in community-based homes. As is the case with other policies originating from emancipatory politics (Ward 2015), deinstitutionalisation may be used as an excuse for reducing costs. This repurposing of deinstitutionalisation for neoliberal ends threatens rather than enhances patients' health and life chances (Ornellas & Engelbrecht 2018).

Besides the cost-reducing impetus that guided the relocation of 1 442 patients from Life Esidimeni, the organisation was extremely rushed, inconsiderate and negligent, which resulted in severe suffering and fatalities (Dhai, Gardner & Mahomed 2022). Following Ntsika Dapo (2021, 175), we avoid the term 'tragedy', as it connotes the inescapability of an event. The Life Esidimeni case was not a tragedy in the literal sense. It could have been avoided, if organised abandonment had not guided institutional logics.

### **A comparative analysis of *zabalaza* (struggle) in song**

In this section we trace the changing meanings of the concept *zabalaza* in liberation song between the early 1990s and the mid 2000s. We do so to show how classic liberation song increasingly gave way to liberation song in a new key in artistic production. A literal translation of the English verb to struggle to isiXhosa/isiZulu is (*uku*)*sokola*. However *ukusokola* as a translation connotes passivity. When you *sokola*, you acknowledge that you are burdened. *Zabalaza*, by contrast, is an active verb. To *zabalaza* is to actively seek for change amid hardships.

Comparing three songs titled *Zabalaza* that were performed between the early 1990s and the mid 2000s, we identify three dominant meanings of *zabalaza* as a concept in song: (1) a rallying cry to join the liberation struggle when freedom was beckoning; (2) a call to persevere as the new democracy was alive with possibilities; and (3) a moment of rupture, a break away from the illusion of democracy and freedom in South Africa. We find that this change in meaning illustrates the emergence of a new key for liberation song.

### **A rallying call**

In 1991, a year after Nelson Mandela's release from prison, the trumpeter Hugh Masekela returned to South Africa after 31 years of exile during which he had become a superstar. As a jazz player, he remained politically active through his music. 'Bra Hugh', as he is known in South Africa, had always longed for home. In 1971 and 1972 he recorded two home-inspired albums, *Masekela and the Union of South Africa* and *Home is Where*

*the Music is*, with fellow exiles Caiphus Semenya and Jonas Gwangwa. Louise Bethlehem (2018) posits that Masekela's political ideas were expressed in the late 1960s with records such as *Masekela*, identifying him as a Black radical internationalist and a pan-Africanist. Masekela had left South Africa as a twenty-one-year-old, shortly after the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre. Upon his return, the 'Sekunjalo' (meaning 'this is it') tour he embarked on with Jabu Khanyile, lead singer of the band Bayete, was the return of the prodigal son. The *Sowetan* declared 'Hugh's Cultural Revolution Begins', highlighting that 'the tour is a fund-raising exercise for an arts and music foundation to be launched' (Metsoamere 1991). The 'Sekunjalo' tour and the *Zabalaza* album revealed his lifelong mission to mobilise from the picket lines.

Khanyile opens the song personifying *zabalaza*. *Zabalaza* asks 'uthuleleni?' (Why are you quiet?). It seems like Khanyile is talking to the people at large, calling on them to (join the) struggle, with the words 'Why are they quiet?' He tells them that those who have struggled have been arrested for nothing (*siboshelwe amahala*). The song's upbeat tempo equals a march towards something grand. It can be read analogous to the feeling of the time: that freedom from apartheid was beckoning. Overall, the song's enchanting sound appears to parallel the mood in the early 1990s, a period filled with hope, as many exiles and political prisoners were returning back home. In video recordings of the performances, one can see Khanyile, aware of the culturally and racially diverse audience, seemingly acting out the lyrics by punching forward the Black Power fist when he sings, 'Thina siboshiwe, siboshelwe amahala' (we have been arrested, arrested for nothing). He crosses his wrists as if they are handcuffed before opening his arms widely as if to say: 'arrested for nothing'. *Zabalaza* was an appeal to come out of the pockets and peripheries of the country to make the effort one last time to liberate the country from white minority rule. We understand Masekela's *Zabalaza* to be a call to join the liberation struggle when it gained momentum after Mandela's release from prison.

### ***A call to persevere: Zabalaza by Brothers of Peace***

The 1990s and early 2000s were the foundational years of kwaito and house in South Africa. These genres emerged as a specific expression of liberation among youth, including their seeking of pleasure through consumption (Livermon 2020). 'People were becoming more and more themselves. It was a take it or leave it attitude. [Kwaito was a vehicle for the message.] This is the way I am, the way – *Ngingakhona*', recounts the kwaito performer Ishmael, relating the genre to the post-1994 dispensation (cited in Livermon 2020, 5). Young people old enough to have known what was happening in the country between the 1970s and the early 1990s but young enough to look for a new form to express themselves were the first ones performing and enjoying kwaito.

Don Laka, Oscar 'Wa batho' Mdlongwa and Christos were the founding members of the kwaito combo Brothers of Peace (BOP). In 1994, they released the album *Traffic Cop*, which reportedly sold more than 50 000 copies. Amid the older generations' harsh criticism of kwaito in the early and mid-1990s, BOP set itself up as the mouthpiece for young people. Mdlongwa and Sibitlo commented on social and political issues of the time. In 1996, for instance, they released *King of Kwaito Uyagawula*, an album that has been called a 'rant against [...] children from privileged "Model C"

schools, lawlessness in society and our overzealous love of everything American' (Monaheng 2014).

BOP's *Zabalaza* has a groovy beat that would qualify it as house, while the lyrical edge is typical of kwaito. On vocals, Mdlongwa calls on T-Man (we assume that to be the producer) to outline a song for BOP to remind South African listeners where they come from. The song calls to mind that, when kwaito fans were growing up, there were the sounds of bazookas, AK-47s and grenades from confrontations between the apartheid police, the military and people fighting for freedom. Mdlongwa and T-Man insist that the listeners should continue to *zabalaza*, that is struggle, to persevere through the hardships of South Africa's young democracy. The three verses in the song repeat the same message in two different languages: in isiZulu, performed by Mdlongwa, and in seSotho, sung by Sibitlo. BOP's *Zabalaza* portrays the first half decade of democracy as promising a better life and political freedom. The song turns motivational, using the liberation movement's slogan of *amandla* (power). However, instead of responding *awethu* (the people), the performers answer *phezulu*, which means 'up'. *Awethu phezulu* can be translated as 'lift up your power'.

BOP's *Zabalaza* reminded the youth of the early 2000s of the tough times from which the country emerged. As bleak as the early years of democracy were, BOP communicated to young people that they should persevere. The pertaining music video of *Zabalaza* shows the musicians working in a coal mine. They wear rags and ride a donkey cart through the streets of a township. The symbolism, of working in a mine and riding a donkey cart loaded with coal, acknowledges the difficult circumstances for young people. However, the message to youth was that if they committed themselves to work, their efforts would yield success. Coming from one of the biggest and oldest stables of dance music, Kalawa Jazmee Records, BOP was perhaps best positioned to send a message to young people that there is hope in perseverance while the latter were 'shaking what their mothers gave them'<sup>6</sup> on the dance floor.

### ***A moment of rapture***

Thandiswa Mazwai, also known as King Tha, is one of the most popular South African musicians. She is also among the most outspoken artists on the unfulfilled promises of the anti-apartheid struggle. In her live production *A Letter to Azania* 'Thandiswa Mazwai Takes "A Letter to Azania" to CT' (2023), she describes the conditions most South Africans encounter after having struggled for liberation as 'something that feels like a disaster for the entire continent, not only for South Africa'. She continues:

The condition here at home, the continuing restlessness of being a Black person in this country, that is something that still sits painfully at my chest. I do have a huge disappointment in our leadership for what feels like a complete [...] this sense that we've been forgotten. That our politicians are focusing on things that are not always good for everyone in this country.

Her statement, especially the words 'this sense that we've been forgotten', can be read as an emotional and experiential account of a politics that we have described above as organised abandonment. This profound disappointment notwithstanding, she characterises her tour *A Letter to Azania* as one way for her listeners to possibly find 'the peace and

the joy to be able to reimagine new worlds'. A *Letter to Azania* promises to take 'the audience on a sonic exploration of the utopian idea of Azania while expressing the melancholy that comes with a dream deferred' (Wana 2023).

Thandiswa Mazwai released her first solo album, *Zabalaza*, in 2006, after ten years of being a member of the kwaito band *Bongo Maffin*, winning several awards and selling widely. Her music moves between soul, Afropop and jazz, and she introduces herself as a wild woman and a rebel singer – a conduit (Mazwai 2017). Her references to musicians and activists shaping the struggle are direct. Her official Facebook page quotes Hugh Masekela's description of her as 'the leader of the past which is now the future'. Her performance style imagines future worlds with African heritage and merges characteristics of a diva with those of a warrior. In the dress she wore in the concert we attended, she reminded us of a bird that could fly to see that very freedom *Letter to Azania* refers to.<sup>7</sup>

She played *Zabalaza*, the album's titular track, during the show. As the first chords of *Zabalaza* sounded, independent filmmaker Imraan Christian's iconic photograph of #Fees-MustFall protesters was shown on a screen. This photograph features a young Black woman holding a banner over her head reading '1976?' (Madrid 2015). The woman and the banner and all the protesters surrounding them seem to ask today's political and economic elites what happened to the visions of the 1976 Soweto uprising. Indeed, Mazwai dedicated the song to the FeesMustFall protesters. A decade into democracy, her song *Zabalaza* addresses the regression of the country under the democratic governments.

*Gogo bek' umthwalo* / Grandma has been carrying this load, put it off now ...  
*Kunin' uhlupheka* / For how long (ages ...) have you been suffering?  
 Little ghetto child  
*Ungazibulali sana* / Don't kill yourself, my dear  
 Ooh! If you take my hand I'll show you how to dream  
*Ayifanelang' ub' iyenzeke lento* / This should not be happening/  
*Emzini kabawo* / in your father's house/ the great father (might refer to Mandela and his legacy)  
*Kungekudala* /soon (we will be ...)  
*Sizozabalaza (Zabalaza, zabalaza)* / We will be struggling ... / *Sizozabalaza thina (Zabalaza)*  
*Sizozabalaza (Zabalaza, zabalaza)*  
*Sizozabalaza (Zabalaza)*  
*Ndivuk' ekuseni* / I wake up in the morning  
*Ndiyom' ezitratweni* / I go in the streets  
*Ndibelek' usana lwami, ndiyocel' imali* / I am carrying my child on my back to beg for money  
*Mna ndihamb' ezinzulwini zobusuku* / I am leaving at midnight  
*Ndizilibaza ndizikhohlisa zonk' intlungu zam'* / I am deceiving myself, I am deceiving all my pain

The song starts with synthesisers and piano creating a tapestry of sound that functions like an introduction to a story the song's lyrical I is telling. In the opening, she relays a message to her grandmother – possibly representing the elders who fought for liberation – who has suffered for far too long. The lyrical I insists on taking her grandmother's load onto her own shoulders and names the things that are ill about this democracy ten years in. She notes the lack of proper housing, the poverty that continues to ravage the land and the lack of empathy from those in power to address these pressing questions. She ragingly acknowledges that all of this is not supposed to be happening in '*emzini kabawo*' (which can be roughly translated as 'my father's house', *bawo* being an isiXhosa term of respect for an older man). *Emzini kabawo* could refer to Nelson Mandela as the person who is like no other associated with the new house of South Africa after the 1994 dispensation.

The song *Zabalaza* lists social ills that can be seen as resulting from organised abandonment: hungry babies, even though there is enough food available; people dying of AIDS, even though there is medication that could prevent these deaths; and the informal settlements where ten years, thirty years after the transition to democracy so many people live without access to basic infrastructure. Mazwai's *Zabalaza* sharply contrasts with the two other songs titled *Zabalaza* discussed before. Tandinwa. Mazwai's *Zabalaza* urges South Africans to rise up against the conditions to which, amongst others, the ANC government has subjected them.

## ***Ziyafana and Life Esidimeni as critiques of organised abandonment***

### ***Ziyafana by Mandisi Dyantyi***

We interpret Mandisi Dyantyi's *Ziyafana* as a liberation song criticising corruption among South African elites. Unlike Thandiswa Mazwai and Hugh Masekela, Mandisi Dyantyi is not known for his activism. Rather, he presents himself as someone who values the community aspect of church: 'I'm not a visitor at my church nor a visitor in that community; I'm part of the community even now. That is what authentic community is; I am their own, and they claim me' ('Mandisi Dyantyi: The Sound of Our People' 2022). He does see his music performing a public political role: 'My art is there to heal people, to connect people, it is there to mirror people's lives, it is there to get people seen and heard' (Maja 2023). Singing in isiXhosa, to him, connects to his understanding of himself as being part of a larger collective bound by ties to each other that transcend time periods.

It is this sense of community that sets the tone for his critique of political leaders not caring for 'us' in the song *Ziyafana* (which can be translated as 'they are the same'). It features on *Cwaka*, his second album, released in 2021. The song was also performed at a live concert that we as a research group attended in 2023 out doors at the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens. Despite the rain, concert-goers danced, especially when *amagwijo* was played. The familiar tunes created rapport between the singer and the audience, inviting listeners to sing and clap along. Such musicking continued into Dyantyi's performance of *Ziyafana*.

In a sorrowful monologue, Dyantyi opened *Ziyafana* backed by the slow play of piano keys, evoking a sad, concerned mood. The lyrical I of the song engages with *nkululeko*, which translates to freedom. *Nkululeko* is a popular name in South Africa, particularly among people born after 1994, the so-called 'bornfrees'. Addressing *Nkululeko* in the lyrics is an acknowledgement of bornfrees' role in the shaping of public discourse, yet it also calls upon them to contribute to South Africa's future. At the same time, *Nkululeko* might refer to South Africa's free society at large. Dyantyi's lyrical I asks why South Africa's leaders do not care. Why do they not value the people of which they are a part?

*Ndambuz unkululeko / I asked Nkululeko*  
*Ngeenkokheli zethu / ... about our leaders*  
*Ndathi yintoni le / I asked what is it*  
*Izenza zingakhathali kangaka / that makes them not care for us*  
*Ndathi yintoni le / I asked what is it*  
*Izenza zingasixabisi kangaka / that makes them not value us*

*Nkululeko* (who responds in the song's chorus) does not answer at first. Like the question in *Senzeni Na?* (what have we done?), the question posed at the beginning of

*Ziyafana* is rhetorical, thereby scandalising the present (compare Nkoala 2013). As Nkululeko is about to respond to the lyrical Is sorrowful enquiry, there is an eight-second silence before the entire ensemble comes to life with the percussion. In our reading, the silence signifies the gap between the aspiration of equality in the fight for liberation and today's persisting inequality. The music that disrupts this silence might stand in for a possible disruption of the status quo. This reading is supported by the chorus: 'They are all the same, they are all liars'. The snare drum and cymbals rock almost at the same time as Nkululeko warns that 'one day, the people will wake up and take power for themselves'. This line is repeated three times for twenty seconds before *ziyafana zonke* ('they are all the same') is repeated multiple times.

*Ziyafana's* critique of corruption among the new, largely Black elites can be related to Frantz Fanon's chapter 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness' in the *Wretched of the Earth* (1963). Fanon describes how liberation comes to a halt due to the local bourgeoisie's relative economic powerlessness and its disregard for redistribution. *Ziyafana* imbues such analysis with emotional appeal. Though it conveys a pessimistic reading of the present, it prophesises a popular uprising in which concertgoers can participate by singing along.

### ***Life Esidimeni by Malcolm Jiyane Tree-O***

The trombone in combination with trumpet, alto-saxophone and horn make up the timbre that characterises the song *Life Esidimeni*. Its title – Life Esidimeni – can be read as a statement about what goes wrong in South Africa. It refers to the state neglect around the Life Esidimeni case that we described above. As Nombuso Mathibela (2021) commented in the music magazine PAM on Life Esidimeni:

Life Esidimeni is one of those places that has failed to live up to the hope of dignity, much like South Africa, a country with no name that continues to break the hearts of Black people through neglect and structurally embodied starvation.

For Mathibela, the case of Life Esidimeni is paradigmatic for the neglect of the many who are subject to organised abandonment. Malcolm Jiyane Tree-O's song addresses this case of organised abandonment through expressing the feelings emerging in response: pain and grief.

The song *Life Esidimeni* is slow, reminiscent of the mid-tempo South African jazz for which Abdullah Ibrahim and Hugh Masekela are known (Kalia 2024).

The mostly instrumental song is more than eleven minutes long. A liberation song is not necessarily dependent on lyrics. Abdullah Ibrahim's famous instrumental song *Manenberg*, for instance, became one of the signature tunes of the struggle against apartheid in the 1980s (Lalu 2022). As Nombuso Mathibela (2021) commented in the music magazine PAM on Life Esidimeni:

Life Esidimeni is one of those places that has failed to live up to the hope of dignity, much like South Africa, a country with no name that continues to break the hearts of Black people through neglect and structurally embodied starvation. For Mathibela, the case of Life Esidimeni is a paradigm for the neglect of the many that have been subject to organised abandonment. Malcolm Jiyane Tree-O's song addresses a case of organised abandonment through expressing the feelings emerging in response: pain and grief.

*Life Esidimeni* is melancholic but light; the trumpet seems to ask questions. Yet, the chorus changes this atmosphere. It is more forward-looking; the trombone-trumpet duet dominating the chorus sounds comforting and hopeful. The two wind instruments playing the same melody invoke a sense of commonality. Only by the eighth minute of the song does the listener hear the soft, intimate voice of the singer for the first time: 'lendaba lbhlungu' (this matter/this story/news is painful) is repeated for about a minute. The singing ends, or rather flows, into a saxophone solo that is much more extrovert than the previous parts. To us, this solo connotes freedom. We interpret it as offering a resolution.

In our reading, *Life Esidimeni* continues a tradition of lament in the history of liberation song. In that respect, it is similar to *Thina Sizwe* ('we, the nation'), which grieves land expropriation, and *Senzeni Na?*

*Life Esidimeni* can equally be regarded as a song that can bring consolation and hope for the future, communicating – largely through harmonics, timbre and unisono melody – that:

'we are not merely products of our tragic environment but are also the generosity of people, spaces, ideas, traditions and above all the generosity of the creator' (Mathibela 2021).

Lament as a musical form expressing grief holds the possibility of symbolic renewal (Porter 2001). Liberation song as lament, of which *Life Esidimeni* is an example, can facilitate the process of transcending grief through creating moments of musicking. During such moments, the audience's presence is key for a shared grieving, eventually and possibly transcending grief into confidence that fundamental political and economic change is possible.

## Conclusion

South African liberation song in a new key addresses the gap between the aspiration of equality that animated the anti-apartheid struggle and the gross racialised inequality that characterises the status quo. We suggested organised abandonment as an alternative concept to structural violence because it encapsulates the culture of neglect that sustains racialised inequality in South Africa today. The concept points to the role of transnationally circulating neoliberal cultural understandings in normalising racialised inequality.

We discussed three liberation songs in a new key that address organised abandonment emotionally and aesthetically. *Life Esidimeni* captures the widely shared grief that state neglect produces, remembering the suffering and premature death of those who died because of cost-saving logics. Similarly, *Ziyafana* addresses the lack of care and value for South Africa's common people among politico-economic elites. It invites audiences to participate musically in the foretelling that the people will wake up and take power. *Zabalaza*, finally, is a rallying cry to rise up against a politics of state neglect that perpetuates racialised inequality in South Africa.

As we show, liberation song is not primarily defined by its lyrics. Also largely instrumental pieces such as *Life Esidimeni* can be classified as liberation song. Yet lyrics do play an important role when it comes to determining a song's politicality, especially when concert-goers sing along or lines of text are referenced on social media.

Future research would benefit from developing a more systematic approach to analyse the phenomenon that we have called liberation song in a new key. Our article provides a starting point for debates on art worlds of liberation song as networks that span arts and

politics in a highly uneven, ultimately transnational struggle for redistribution. At a time of organised abandonment – in South Africa and elsewhere – political song can console and also powerfully spur us into action.

## Notes

1. 'This means that all Blacks must sit as one big unit, and no fragmentation and distraction from the mainstream of events be allowed. Hence, we must resist the attempts by protagonists of the Bantustan theory to fragment our approach. We are oppressed not as individuals, not as Zulus, Xhosas, Vendas or Indians. We are oppressed because we are Black. We must use that very concept to unite ourselves and to respond as a cohesive group. We must cling to each other with a tenacity that will shock the perpetrators of evil' (Biko & Stubbs 2002, 97).
2. This non-elitist definition of art draws on Ron Eyerman's definition of art (2006), Christopher Small's notion of musicking (1998) and Lisa McCormick's theorising of performance (2017).
3. Sotho can be divided further into three distinct groups: seSotho, sePedi and seTswana.
4. Esidimeni is a noun that derives from the word *isidima*, which translates as 'dignity', the prefix *es* and suffix *eni* suggest that it is 'a place of dignity'.
5. Gauteng is a South African province; the city of Johannesburg falls within this province.
6. *Shake Whatcha Mama Gave Ya* is a song by Poison Clan that became a reference to dancing.
7. Transcript of observational participation in Thandiswa Mazwai's concert in Cape Town on 25 February 2023.

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