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Gender, race, and the biopolitics of extractivism in the poetry of Nontsizi Mgqwetho

Abstract

Published almost exclusively in the multilingual Johannesburg newspaper *Umteteli wa Bantu* during the 1920s, Nontsizi Mgqwetho's poetry is enmeshed with the racial and industrial politics of her time and place. Despite its denunciations of the colonial state and vehement calls for black unity and activism, her work is complicated by its publication in a newspaper sponsored by the Chamber of Mines. This article investigates Mgqwetho's forceful political poetry and its intersection with both the coercive, racist labor policies of her times and the discursive power of *Umteteli Wa Bantu*. It argues that in linking her religious and political convictions with the social anxieties of her times, Mgqwetho's work provided the ford through the era's turbulent political waters.

Introduction

On 15 January 1921, the year following the largest labour strikes ever seen on the African continent, Nontsizi Mgqwetho published the poem "Iziko le Nyembezi (Ngompoposho ka Mr. Twebu)" ("The Vale of Tears (on Mr Thwebu's article)") in the Johannesburg newspaper *Umteteli Wa Bantu*. It opens:

Hanewu! 1920	Hanewu, 1920,
Nyaka wendaniso	year of frustration!
Safuna Inkululeko	We sought our freedom:
Watoba imbumbulu	you sent down gunfire,
Qo kekona; Qo:	Pow! and Pow! again.
………………………	………………………..
Kukusiwa kwezikalo	Workers' complaints
Zabasebenzi ezinkosini	must be brought to the bosses:

Kuba bengena ndawo	there's nowhere else
Yokuhlambana induma	to tend their wounds.
Ke lento izinkosi	We must stand as one
Ifuna u Manyano	to face the bosses,
Kuba zingonyama ezijonga	lions that stalk us
Ngeliso elibomvu.[1]	with bloody eyes.
(Mgqwetho 30-31)	

One of Mgqwetho's earliest published works, the poem responds directly to the strikes and to the mining industry at the heart of the dispute. It also presents moral and political stances that recur throughout her work. Later in the poem she writes, "U Tixo udinge / Ukuba wosinceda / Kodwa kungengapandle / Kweyetu imigudu" ("God won't deign / to grant us help / unless we strive / to help ourselves"), and "Iziko le nyembezi / Liziko lo manyano / Kona ukuze sizibone / Nezivato ze Zulu" ("The vale of tears / is the vale of unity: / united we'll wear / the raiments of heaven.") (Mgqwetho 32-33). With these stanzas, Mgqwetho presents her philosophies of unity and Christian self-help that unfurl in poem after poem over the course of a literary career entangled with the tumultuous industrial politics and social upheavals of her times.

South African scholar Ntongela Masilela describes Nontsizi Mgqwetho as a poet "fundamentally preoccupied with the historical self" who played a key role in modernizing "the historical consciousness of the African people" (*Historical Figures* 272; "African Intellectual" 262). He situates Mgqwetho among the intellectuals of the New Africa movement, figures who worked to reconcile tradition with the rapid cultural transformations that accompanied European colonization and expanding extractive capitalism on the continent. Building on the work of earlier poets such as S.E.K. Mqhayi and William Wellington Gqoba, Mgqwetho enlarged the expressive and communicative capacities of traditional isiXhosa literature as she incorporated elements from the written, European tradition (*Historical Figures*). Her poetry, published almost exclusively in the African-language newspaper *Umteteli Wa Bantu* throughout the 1920s, "sought to form an awareness of African patriotism and African nationalism in the historical consciousness of dispossessed and disenfranchised African people" (*Historical Figures*).

Like her other work, Mgqwetho's poem "Iziko le Nyembezi" responds directly to the condition of the African laborer and to the unjust racial politics taking shape within and alongside

Johannesburg's mining sector and confronts the myriad divisions that plagued black Johannesburg society in the early twentieth century. Through the early decades of the twentieth century, the South African state tightened its control over black bodies and black labour through such regulations as pass laws, legislated segregation, and prohibitions against miscegenation. These coercive tactics of labour procurement and control, enacted at a legislative level, were reinforced through representational strategies that shifted responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of African laborers to laborers themselves. As Khwezi Mkhize demonstrates, the "narratives, images, and texts" in *Umteteli Wa Bantu*, the "People's Paper," perform "processes upon African bodies" not unlike the regimes of law and surveillance that rendered workers largely powerless within an emerging system of racist capitalism (22).

At the same time, by 1920 the Garveyite movement had spread "throughout the Atlantic world, galvanising members of the black intelligentsia as well as many among the common folk in South Africa to challenge previously accepted patterns of white domination" (Cobley 144). Reading Mgqwetho's work at the intersection of these perspectives, examining it as an element within a complicated juncture of discourse and politics, raises interesting questions. How does Mgqwetho's poetry interact with representations of African laborers that constructed both the workers' identity as a function of their utility to racist capitalism and the workers' responsibility for maintaining this utility? Does her poetry, like the written and visual clips from the pages of *Umteteli* that Mkhize examines, present African bodies "in both their desired and undesirable states"? Do her poems reinforce African racial subjectivity or challenge such positioning? Certain of Mgqwetho's poems seem to ascribe to *Umteteli*'s general ethos, exhorting agency and action by people with limited options while castigating the behavior—sexual and otherwise—of men and women who were severely constrained by circumstance as they navigated the tectonic social shifts of the times. Even as it denounces increasingly racist policies and calls for unity amongst Africans to improve their lot, Mgqwetho's poetry can at times be seen to articulate a similar moral disciplining of wayward sexuality and bodily dissent that characterize other aspects of *Umteteli Wa Bantu*, the newspaper which published almost all her known work. On the other hand, her poetry reveals a deep humanism and outrage at the injustice suffered by her compatriots at the hands of European capitalists. It speaks in particular to the situation of women within an emerging social order that was at once vibrant and oppressive, liberating and difficult, as African women made their way from traditional roles on rural homesteads into the colonial workforce.

Various scholars have pointed out the complexities and ambiguities of Mgqwetho's work,

which embodies the tensions and complexities, the ambiguities and contradictions of industrial and Indigenous societies in collision (e.g., McGiffin). However, unlike some other South African intellectuals who turned against the “heathenism” or “barbarism” of their ancestral traditions, Mgqwetho’s work merges her Christian conviction and her respect for her African heritage (Masilela "New African Modernity" 332). Commenting on her lines “Nantso ke! Inyaniso yezi Bhalo / Napantsi ke, kweyetu imibhalo” (“The truth is there in the scriptures / and also within our blankets.”) (Mgqwetho 197), Thulani Nxasana writes that throughout her oeuvre, Mgqwetho is “accommodative and tolerant” of multiple versions of truth (8).

This article further complicates Mgqwetho’s work by drawing on Mhkize’s thesis on the biopolitical role of *Umteteli Wa Bantu* as well as scholarship on the nation-building role of the women’s clubs that formed an important component of the social world of which Mgqwetho was part. I examine English translations of Nontsizi Mgqwetho’s poetry compiled in *The Nation’s Bounty*, edited and translated by Jeff Opland, and digitized copies of the multilingual newspaper *Umteteli Wa Bantu* in which the isiXhosa originals were published. I argue that over the course of her decade-long career as a public poet, Mgqwetho’s poetry articulated not only the powerful convictions of a politically active woman but also revealed her expanding humanism and growing respect for people trapped in a long struggle against the untenable circumstances of their times.

Mgqwetho and Mining

In 1886 the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand set in motion a series of monumental changes that quickly transformed the area’s dry, open savannahs to an urbanized site of industrial extraction. Within a decade, the fledgling community of Johannesburg had grown into a multi-ethnic metropolis of seventy thousand and gold mining had grown into South Africa’s dominant economic sector. By 1920, over two hundred thousand black mineworkers arrived annually on the Witwatersrand, part of a vast migrant workforce imported from as far afield as the regions that are now Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Zambia, and Malawi (Jeeves; Beinart). The imposition of racist legislation and industrial policies regulating the African labor force and its relationship with whites added to growing labor tensions and by the 1920s Johannesburg had become a hotbed of political unrest.

Most of these developments were visibly dominated by men and indeed, the gender balance of the remote, frontier city was decidedly skewed. Cherryl Walker reports that sex ratios were unbalanced in all South African towns of the era, whose populations generally contained at least

three times as many men as women (13). The disparity was most pronounced on the Rand, where men outnumbered women by almost nine to one (13). Male-dominated industries drew men from rural homesteads toward urban centers, leaving most women in the countryside where they bore the brunt of subsistence labor (Mbeki; Sibisi). However, women have always lived in urban areas throughout South Africa and often constituted a visible and vibrant political force, even though much historiography has overlooked their contributions. Women were very much present on the Rand throughout Johannesburg's early decades and played an active role in the mining town's development. As racial tensions deepened and racial segregation became entrenched, they were active and vociferous in addressing injustices. Writings of highly visible women such as Charlotte Maxeke, Lilian Tshabalala, Florence Jabana and Nontsizi Mgqwetho attest to women's active presence in Johannesburg culture and politics in the early twentieth century and their contributions are only beginning to be fully appreciated (Masola).

Little is known for certain about Nontsizi Mgqwetho's life and how or why she made her way across a dangerously racist landscape to the Rand; most biographical details are speculative based on her writing. For instance, in the introduction to his anthology of her work, Jeff Opland assembles evidence suggesting that "in 1897 she was living in Tamara, which lies to the north of the road between King William's Town and Peddie" in what is now Eastern Cape province and made her way to Johannesburg around the end of the First World War (Opland "Introduction" xv). Based on her writings, Opland speculates that Mgqwetho might have been close to the noble lineage of King Sandile. It remains unclear where and how she acquired the education that enabled such prolific writing or how she became involved with a prominent urban newspaper, but it is evident that she was a valued and influential contributor to its pages.

Mgqwetho was a prolific writer but throughout her decade-long career publishing in *Umteteli Wa Bantu* she oscillated between periods of regular activity and lengthy, unexplained silences. Of her 103 poems to appear in *Umteteli*, four were published in 1920, two in 1921, one in 1922 and four in the closing weeks of 1923. This scattered output was followed by a highly productive period in 1924, when Mgqwetho contributed a poem almost weekly for much of the year, a total output of 45 poems. These weekly contributions continued into 1925, when she wrote twenty poems between the turn of the year and 9 May 1925. There is a pause in her published work until 26 December 1925, but she regained her rhythm in 1926: apart from February and March, she published a poem almost weekly until the first week of September. At that point she fell silent for over two years. Her final two published poems appeared at Christmas 1928 and New Year's 1929.

It is certainly significant that almost half of Mgqwetho's poems were written in 1924, the year of one of South Africa's most important national elections. On 17 June 1924, Jan Smuts's South Africa Party government fell to the Pact Government, a coalition of the Labour Party and the Nationalist Party led by General J.B.M. Hertzog. In the years that followed, the Pact Government enacted a series of policies favoring white workers and entrenching the racial segregation that in 1948 would lead to full-blown apartheid. Mgqwetho's poems engaged directly with these political events, making them one of only a handful of political commentaries of the era known to be written by an African woman. For instance, in "Kuguzulwa Okumkani! Kumiswe Okumkani! (General Smuts—General Hertzog)" ("The king is dead! Long live the king! (General Smuts—General Hertzog)"), published on 12 July 1924, shortly after the election, she writes,

Yadunyelwa buxhonti bezi Bhalo	Oppression was touted by glittering scriptures
Yati lahlani eyenu imibhalo	that taught us to cast off our blankets,
Yaduda inetemba lokutulula	intent on unloading on us an elephant
Indlovu edla Izizwe kwesika Mhle.	that devours our king's domains.
Vuka! Uzibandakanye Afrika	Wake up Africa! Come together!
Isinyabi sikwabusha izandla	Only a fool wrings his hands.
Amadlagusha alala esotuka	Mutton Gluttons sleep with open eyes.
Waniqikeka! Umkoba nencambu zawo.	Timber! Yellowwood forests tumble.
Ngu Tixo ke Onokukunjulwa	God alone is worth remembering.
Into egoso ayinakolulwa	Something twisted can't be straightened:
Akuko nto intsha ngapantsi kwelanga	this new regime holds nothing new,
Leyo ikoyo ibikona kakade.	the present's no change from the past.
Safana salahla umbuso wakuti	We yielded sovereignty to no purpose,
Sagelel' emzini watshona owetu	embraced the new, and lost our own:
Kahlutw' amakaya kwahlutw' ubukosi	our homes and our kingship were plundered.
(Mgqwetho 168)	

Decrying the looting of South African resources, Mgqwetho remarks that the election has brought

no meaningful change to oppressed people; instead, the loss of home and heritage to white "Mutton Gluttons" continues. The closing stanza of the poem invokes the prophetess Nongqawuse, whose prophecies brought about the disastrous cattle-killing movement and the downfall of the amaXhosa nation, concluding "Zemka—ezobawo nobuti—kwazintuli" ("Our fathers' possessions crumbled to dust"). However, even as the poem calls on Africans to "wake up" and "come together," the central message of the poem is that leadership is ultimately in the hands of "God in Heaven," who "controls royalty in every nation" and "grants it to whom he likes" (166). Here, as elsewhere in her work, Mgqwetho's call to action is complicated by her religious convictions and social allegiances. If politics and the power of politicians ultimately rest in the hands of God, as she suggests, do Africans truly have the power to resist? The poem is ambiguous in this regard.

By the early years of the twentieth century, the Witwatersrand had become the world's single largest source of gold and the largest employer of African labor on the continent (Allen 132). However, the profitability of the industry was hampered by extremely high production costs, the depth and dispersion of the ore, and the Rand's distance from any seaport, which impeded the transport of both materials and personnel. With labor the only variable cost in the industry, the colonial and then the fledgling South African state unrolled a series of racist policies to coerce African labor into the gold mines and ensure that it remained unskilled and poorly paid. Among these policies were the land acts designed to destroy African autonomy and ensure lasting dependence on the colonial economy. In 1894 the Cape Colony's Glen Grey Act had imposed a new system of individual tenure on communal lands in the Glen Grey district. As Cecil Rhodes explained to parliament in his defense of the Glen Grey Act: "Every black man cannot have three acres and a cow, or four morgen and a commonage right … It must be brought home to them that in the future nine tenths of them will have to spend their lives in daily labor, in physical work, in manual labor" (qtd in Fairweather 77). The Glen Gray Act was followed by the infamous 1913 Land Act that expanded a system of land reserves to the whole of the newly minted Union of South Africa, setting aside a mere 7.3 percent of the land base (later expanded to 13 percent) as reserves for blacks. The Land Act, which prohibited black South Africans from residing on or owning land in non-designated areas, promptly rendered much of South Africa's population landless and without any form of subsistence and propelled large numbers of people toward colonial industries in search of work.

However, the land acts were accompanied by pass laws that restricted the movement of African peoples rendered destitute by the loss of their lands. These draconian laws restricted the free

movement of blacks between land reserves, urban areas and worksites. At the same time, labor dynamics in the mining industry took shape around an increasingly entrenched color bar that separated unskilled black laborers from white managers. Whites were imported to fill managerial roles and many of these middle-and upper-middle class recruits were not immigrants to the colony but rather were migrant laborers themselves; working temporary contracts far from home, these recruits had little or no interest in developing relationships within a multinational and multiethnic community of workers (Allen). Hailing from the class-based cultures of England and mainland Europe, these managers were inherently prejudiced toward manual laborers and seized opportunities to assert their racial superiority and the power granted them by their culture, class and education (Allen). Tensions mounted with the advent of the First World War, which made skilled white labor even more scarce and expensive, while living conditions for black workers—whose wages had stagnated even as costs of food and clothing rose precipitously—grew increasingly untenable. On 16 February 1920 a small strike of black mineworkers began at the Cason Section of the East Rand Proprietary Mine. Within several days some 37,000 black mineworkers from 21 of the 35 gold mines were involved. A further 8600 white workers were unable to work due to the shutdown (Allen). This sustained, industry-wide strike was the largest in African history, yet the Chamber of Mines dismissed black workers' pressing need for a wage increase. Instead, they implemented measures that would have a lasting effect on South African culture and politics.

The 1920 Mine Strike and *Umteteli wa Bantu*

In Vic Allen's appraisal, a particularly significant outcome of the 1920 black mineworker strikes was the Chamber of Mines' increased distrust of the small class of educated and literate Africans whom it saw as dangerous potential organizers of labor action (Allen). To address this threat, the Chamber began to disrupt racial and class solidarity by actively promoting a middle-class identity and encouraging class segregation. Members of a literate middle class, distinguished by their income, sensibilities, and educational accomplishments, would, the Chamber felt, see their status, income, and sensibilities as separate from and superior to those of the polyglot mass of African laborers. By reinforcing class distinctions, for example by allowing literate mine clerks—but not laborers—the right to form a union, Allen claims that the Chamber aimed to disrupt racial solidarities and discourage literate black South Africans from responding to the grievances of the black working class. In a study of the Transvaal Native Mine Clerks' Union, Alan Cobley writes that "the perceived threat of a cross-class alliance between the emerging black petty bourgeoisie and the radicalised

black working class gave [the union] an unprecedented opportunity to influence the policy of the Chamber of Mines" (Cobley 143). The Chamber also decided to finance the publication of a vernacular language weekly newspaper, *Umteteli wa Bantu* ("Mouthpiece of the Native People") to serve as a voice for the educated and literate class and a propaganda instrument (Allen).

Allan's argument about the origins of *Umteteli wa Bantu* is complicated by the work of other scholars who write that it was African nationalists themselves who petitioned the Chamber to initiate a centrist newspaper that would serve as a counterbalance to the more radical *Abantu-Batho* with which they often disagreed (Switzer and Switzer). Brian Willan names Saul Msane and Isaiah Bud-M'belle as two of the African political leaders who sought "support from the Chamber of Mines for a newspaper which would provide an alternative voice to *Abantu-Batho*, the Congress newspaper that was controlled by the radical Transvaal branch of the movement" (qtd in Opland *Xhosa Poets* 251). According to Willan, this original petition was unsuccessful; it was only after the 1920 mine strike that the Chamber warmed to the politicians' proposal. No doubt *Umteteli*'s creation is a complex story of the converging interests of divergent groups. In any case, its establishment shifted the politics of the black South African press by marking the beginning of white business involvement as a means of mitigating the influence of an increasingly radical independent African media (Switzer and Switzer). The resulting publication enabled the circulation of a moderate discourse that provided a corrective to the imminent danger of a working-class movement that might "cut across racial lines" by discursively reinforcing the legal mechanisms that structured the procurement and control of coerced labor (Cobley; Mkhize).

If the Chamber did indeed set out to undermine and fracture African leadership, it appears to have chosen an effective mechanism. Tension between *Umteteli* and its rival weekly, *Abantu-Batho*, the mouthpiece of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) established by Pixley ka Seme in 1912, was evident from *Umteteli*'s inaugural issue, in which the editor stated in no uncertain terms that "the editors of 'Abantu-Batho' are at odds with us at 'Umteteli Wa Bantu'" (Editorial 1920, trans. Mkhize 2010, 25). *Umteteli* laid out its moderate stance in its second issue, dated 8 May 1920, in an editorial in English entitled "The Middle Course":

> We shall eagerly grasp the hand held out to help us, be it white or black. We have faith in our own efforts, but it is useless to blind ourselves to the utter necessity of enlisting the co-operation of our European friends. We cannot succeed without the help of those who are able to help, and we must therefore set ourselves to the task of drawing to us the moderate thinkers of the white section of the community…. We shall be unwise if we

> jeopardise this advantage by any rashness of speech or action. (2)

An editorial on 21st June 1924 is even more accommodating of white interests. Opening with Prince Arthur of Connaught's admonishments to Chiefs and Headmen during his 1921 speech in Pretoria, it goes on to decry the need for African leaders willing to work cooperatively with European overlords: "There are many such men who might safely be trusted to lead their people out of the darkness of oppression into the light of freedom; who would organise capably and sensibly with European approval and support. But the nation is unready. The mass of the people has not yet learned that co-operation is the essence of progress, and that a subject people cannot make any appreciable advance without the sympathy and help of those who hold control over them" ("Back Number" 2). Going on to denounce the African National Congress and the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) the author writes,

> Each of these associations has outlived such usefulness as it might once have laid claim to, and…the interests of the Native people would be well served by their early dissolution…. They are professional politicians with a pronounced bent for mischief, and they achieve the notoriety which is their immediate aim by loudly opposing everything that promises relief and by their assiduous distortion of European intention and motive…The African National Congress is a back number. It is an effete institution and its influence is all behind it. It has lost what repute it once enjoyed, and it stands today as a monument to the jealousy and dissension which have been responsible for its disintegration.

The author calls for both organizations to be "scrapped" in the absence of any "evidence that they serve any useful purpose. But organisation of some kind is essential to progress, and it is time that Bantu moderates emerged to undertake the conduct of Bantu affairs" ("Back Number" 2). However, these calls for moderation and racial equanimity did not equate to unqualified acceptance of unjust racial policies. An earlier article that opened the 15 May 1920 issue called out legal and systemic racism as it railed against the color bar:

> In South Africa the accident of colour determines whether a man shall or shall not be given scope for the best that is in him to do; and no matter what his accomplishments the black man finds himself curbed and restrained…relegated to the position of menial—a hewer of wood and drawer of water…He is faced in the Transvaal with a legal disability which effectively shackles him industrially, and forbids the employer to utilise his services except in the capacity of common labourer. The legal restriction applies only to the

> mining industry, and because of its admitted inequity and unnaturalness it might easily be overcome and removed. But a far stronger deterrent lies in the attitude of the European manual workers towards the natives of the country. Organised white labour in the Transvaal has insisted upon the maintenance of the colour bar, and has hitherto had power to enforce its dictum…. We cannot imagine that the colour bar exists because the white workers are afraid of being ousted by the native competitors. Rather, we believe, its existence is due to the prejudice which has always characterised the behaviour of Europeans to the subject races. (2)

As segregation deepened following the election of the Pact government, it was economic inequality, rather than segregation per se, that immediately attracted the objections of *Umteteli* authors. The week following the election, on 21 June 1924, alongside its denunciations of the ICU and ANC, *Umteteli* editors reported, "we are not afraid. We do not attach any real importance to election promises…. We are undismayed even by General Hertzog's assurance that the Native people will be 'segregated,' or by his intention, often and clearly expressed, to wrest from the Native his power to influence future elections. General Hertzog knows, as the Natives know, that his Government could do neither of these things" ("The Pact Wins" 2). Yet editorials in subsequent issues reveal mounting concern over the Pact administration, the prospect (eventually realized) of full disenfranchisement of the African population, and the spectre of further land reserve designations and removals. While the tone of the editorials throughout June 1924 is sombre, it remains guardedly optimistic, speculating hopefully that segregation could be the best practical solution to ongoing racial strife.

Nontsizi Mgqwetho's poetic response to segregation has none of the measured tone of forbearance that characterizes the newspaper's other commentators. Eleven days after the election of the Pact government, her poem "Ukutula! Ikwakukuvuma!!" ("Silence Implies Consent") appeared on page six of the 28 June 1924 issue of *Umteteli*. In a column beneath advertisements for Erasmic solidified brilliantine and Price's candles for domestic and mining use, she exclaims,

Taru! Mhleli ngesituba sezi Mbongi!	Editor thanks for the poets' column,
Asinakutula umhlab'ubonlile	we can't sit silent, the country's rotten:
…………………………………..	……………………………………...
Lemiteto idlula eka Moses	The laws outnumber those of Moses!
Lihasa kuwe eliza ngokutula	They dish out your portion if you sit silent:
Litupa lengwe lanyatel' esangweni	it's the tracks of a leopard across your yard.

Kuba ngokutula! Bati uyavuma!	If you sit silent they say you agree.
……………………………….	…………………………………….
Gquba! Ungatuli Mdaka we Afrika	Dark One of Africa, don't sit in silence,
Boguqa bakedame nabalwa nawe	quell your foes with a roar of defiance!
Lovangeli yabo yokusikohlisa	This gospel of theirs, designed to deceive us,
Mina ingangam ndigaqe ngedolo.	stands as tall as I do down on my knees.
Lingasiposa ne Zulu siyimamela	Heed its word and heaven's lost:
Kub'inomkonto obuye usihlabe	it's a spear that wheels to stab us.
Iyahanahanisa kumntu Ontsundu	The hypocritical cant of the white man's gospel
Iwugqwetile ke lomhlaba ka Palo.	turns Phalo's land on its head.
(Mgqwetho 158)	

Such invective suggests that *Umteteli*'s industrial patronage had little effect on Mgqwetho's ability or willingness to assert her opinion openly and forcibly and to call for radical action by her compatriots. She points out the connection between the increasingly numerous laws that circumscribe the lives of black South Africans and the "treacherous gospel" that purports to assist all souls in reaching heaven, regardless of race. Far from voicing a petty bourgeois stance of deference to European employers, the poem urges blacks to be wary of churches that preach "docility and passive acceptance of government control" (Opland "Notes" 451).

In this poem and others, Mgqwetho speaks to and about the divisions that she saw increasingly defining South African society as legislation in support of the mining industry ordered life on the Rand and beyond it. These divided conditions pitted rural against urban, White against Black, Christian against traditionalist, and human against nature in newly imposed dichotomies that were redefining life in an industrializing South Africa. Within this world, women and the bounteous African landscape were treated as free goods while new sexual divisions of labor devalued women's work and role in society. Mgqwetho frequently echoes editor Marshall Maxeke's political rhetoric in calling for the need to seek and find "a ford," common and peaceable ground to overcome festering religious, political, and ethnic divisions between the black and white races, workers and their overlords, and African peoples themselves.

That *Umteteli* itself could offer such a ford may have been the hope of both Maxeke and Mgqwetho. Aimed at a multilingual audience of both men and women, *Umteteli*'s articles were

written in a mix of English, isiXhosa, isiZulu, SeSotho and SePedi and among its advertisers were dressmakers, St. Agnes' industrial school for native girls, and Royal Baking Powder.[2] Not only was the readership comprised of both men and women, but the authorship was also as well. Beginning in 1920, Nontsizi Mgqwetho became a regular contributor, and although she remains the best-known and most frequently cited female contributor to the paper, the extensive contributions by unnamed authors—and by the nameless production and layout crew—may well have included many women over the years. For instance, the pseudonym of one poet, "Taru Bawo" (Mercy Father), suggests a female author in its adoption of a surname commonly used by women practicing *hlonipha* (respectful) speech.[3]

Umteteli decried racially unjust treatment of workers by the mining industry, yet paradoxically it also used representational means of regulating behaviors and attitudes, of transforming "the collective and individual bodies of Africans into a systematized domain of knowledge" (Butchart 1998, 94, qtd in Mkhize 2010, 22). Mkhize argues that in its deployment of such knowledge, *Umteteli* rendered "the African mineworker helpless in a nexus of controlling laws and regulations, at the same time convincing him that he is responsible for his own health and safety in this unfamiliar context in which he is powerless" (Mkhize 2). This stance was laid out a week after the color bar article appeared in the stated "Objects of the Paper." Here *Umteteli* listed among its primary aims, "the industrial education of the Native. The development of his mind and the direction of his thought. To present to him the news of the day in simple and attractive form," and, "to point to the relation of hygiene and health" (8). The ninth and final object was, "generally to interest and amuse readers whilst inculcating the higher moral and social principles." Through a mix of literature, news, advertising, and editorial content, the paternalistic editors clearly aimed to inculcate in readers (and in unlettered members of the working class to whom the paper was read aloud) a middle-class cultural perspective that the editors deemed morally, socially, and biologically superior.

This middle-class perspective included particular opinions regarding sexual propriety. Despite promoting the extension of the African mind by adopting the norms of colonial society, and despite the paper's calls for both equality and racial amity, *Umteteli* was careful to place limits on the degree to which whites and their values should be embraced. Its authors took pains to avoid being seen as promoting miscegenation, stating,

> It must not be thought that the advancement of the Native peoples threatens an invasion of the abodes of those who are set above us. We have our own dignity and pride of race, and we have no wish to encroach upon, or to penetrate within, the domesticities of the people of

> another race. We long for the amenities, but we do not want to interfere with the family life of others. We are sufficient unto ourselves, and…we shall be content if the white and colored races remain everlastingly apart. ("The Middle Course" 2).

The passage, part of the paper's inaugural editorial, suggests that the policing of bodies and sexualities was fully internalized by the *Umteteli* editorial staff and would be reinforced throughout the paper. While Mgqwetho's poetry is more concerned with party politics than biopolitics and with the complexities and hypocrisies of Christian doctrine as preached to and practiced by African peoples, she had much to say about the condition of women on the Rand.

Women and biopolitics on the rand

Industrial policies on the Rand were blatantly sexist; land reserves and other policies were enacted with the explicit intention of removing African *men* from self-sufficient livelihoods and from family life while excluding women from urban economic activity and confining them to reproductive roles on the reserves. Godfrey Lagden made this clear with his statement in 1909 that 'A man cannot go with his wife and children and his goods and chattels on to the labour market. He must have a dumping ground. Every rabbit must have a warren where he can live and burrow and breed, and every native must have a warren too' (qtd in Fairweather 77). The racist geographical segregation that his Lagden Commission and other imposed regulations created took an enormous toll on social cohesion, marriage, and family life in African communities. Although Harriet Sibisi claims that broken marriages were rare in Zulu society "despite long periods of separation because of migratory labor" (168) and despite V.I. Allen's claim that migratory labor built on longstanding social practices such as seasonal transhumance, it is clear that the scale of industrial and colonial policies, their racialized nature, and the severe repercussions for violating them placed enormous strain on families. In rural areas, the disruption of traditional livelihoods and gender roles placed an undue burden on rural women who spent much of their time hauling water, working the fields and caring for family members excluded from the industrial economy, taking on men's work in addition to that traditionally assigned to women. Colonial codes established through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries further exacerbated women's inferior social status: despite the increasing absence of men, new policies prevented women from owning and cultivating their own fields, resulting in a loss of both economic independence and social status for women (Walker).

Even as black South Africans on the Rand were increasingly squeezed by rising living costs in the early decades of the twentieth century, African women had few options for income

generation. Most women who made their way to urban areas to work as wage laborers were employed in the domestic sector. Others were "forced into low paying occupations such as laundering or riskier beer brewing or prostitution" (Limb 70). Women's exclusion from the capitalist economy often forced them into compromising relationships of economic dependency, realities that made women "the target of moralising stereotypes about their sexuality" (Limb 70).

Certain of Mgqwetho's early poems voice anxieties about female virtue and respectability that were common in an era of rapid and profound social change. In "Ingxoxo yo Mginwa ku Magqoboka" ("A Red Debates with Christians") published in November 1923, she castigates women who "crossed the land in search of marriage, / shamelessly shacked up with live-in lovers, / cavorted in dances with young men in New Clare" ("Ziqibe lomhlaba zifuna ukwenda / Ziqeshe zindlwana zishweshwe utuli / Zibet' onomtatsi kwa Tulandivile") (Mgqwetho 50). These lines admonishing women for licentious behavior echo the era's pervasive belief that women's changing behavior and social position threatened traditional social values and mores that it was women's particular responsibility to safeguard. Mgqwetho's railing against "live-in lovers" and the licentiousness of Africans in Johannesburg appears tinged with sexual moralizing informed by her mix of Christian convictions, traditional rural heritage, and participation in the upright social institutions of the literate society of which she was part.

On the other hand, the title of the poem complicates such a straightforward reading. The "Red People" on whose behalf Mgqwetho often speaks "refused to enter modernity because of the precondition of conversion" (Masilela "African Intellectual" 274). "Red" traditionalists, so called for their loyalty to the tradition of wearing red ochre powder, opposed the version of modernity offered to African people: the preconceived bundle of culture, spirituality, technology, and institutions that made no attempt to integrate the beliefs and practices of Africans themselves and that required uncompromising acceptance. In giving voice to these perspectives, Mgqwetho challenges this prescriptive delivery of modernity, insisting instead that a modern South African society must integrate the values and visions of African peoples. The traditionalist speaker of this poem berates Christian converts for their obsequious behaviour, calling them slaves to white fashion. Far from producing upstanding citizens, the speaker claims that Christianity has instead resulted in jails and courts "crammed to capacity" with "the learned products of school education" (50). The poem echoes the approach taken by William Wellington Gqoba in his two long poems published several decades earlier in the Lovedale newspaper *Isigidimi samaXosa,* The amaXhosa Express" (Opland *Xhosa Poets* 226-6; "Notes" 456). In her poem, Mgqwetho's own standpoint on the issue disappears

into the voice of her adopted persona and other poems appear equally ambiguous. In a passage of "Pulapulani! Makokwetu" ("Listen, compatriots!") that recounts the personal sacrifices of her activism, she writes

Taru! Mdakakazi ngqele ese Lundini	Mercy, Dusky, Drakensburg snow
Enje ngayo Imibete yase Herimone	like morning dew on Mont Hermon.
Ndakhubeka ndibheka emlungwini	I blundered in going to whites;
Awu! Ndeva sendibanjwa ngamadindala.	Oh I felt the cops' cuffs on me!
(Mgqwetho 79)	

Yet the sinuous and densely imagistic poem is rife with sexual innuendo—at least in English translation. Taking herself as the subject, she writes "Wild beast too fierce to take from behind, / those who know you tremble in tackling you" and "Mercy, Chizama, who eats her meat raw; no-one knows your ancestors" (78). While the notes to the poem state that Mgqwetho "urges [sophisticated urban] women to return to traditional custom," the "racy, urban tone" suggests a more ambiguous message and that seems to hint at the author's sexual transgressions—or perhaps transgressions imposed upon her (Opland "Notes" 457).

Mgqwetho lived and worked within a community of other women and while she was exceptional in articulating the concerns of her contemporaries, her outspoken activism was likely more common at the time than is easily seen in the historic record. While Mgqwetho is a relatively shadowy figure about whom little is known, Charlotte Maxeke, Mgqwetho's contemporary and friend, is celebrated as South Africa's first black woman graduate and the founding president of the Bantu Women's League. Born in the Blinkwater area near Fort Beaufort on 7 April 1874 and the eldest of six children, Maxeke left South Africa in 1891 with the South African Choir. After touring throughout the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States, she enrolled in Wilberforce University in Ohio where she graduated with a Bachelor of Science. At Wilberforce, Maxeke also met Marshall McDonald Maxeke, who had travelled from Middledrift, South Africa to complete his own studies. The couple later married and returned to South Africa where they established rural schools in present day Limpopo Province and in emigrant Thembuland before moving to the Witwatersrand in 1918. Within the first several issues of the paper, Marshall Maxeke stepped into the role of editor of *Umteteli wa Bantu* (Opland "*Abantu-Batho*").

Maxeke's internationalism is illustrative of the transcontinental ties between African American and South African black activists that developed during the early decades of the twentieth century (Healy-Clancy). For instance, Lilian Tshabalala's "Daughter of Africa" women's club,

launched in 1932, was modelled after the African American women's club movement. Like other women of her era, Maxeke, founding president of the National Council of African Women, was locally engaged in regional and national organizations, but she also drew on rich transatlantic connections developed during her lengthy period abroad. Through their international connections and activism, South African clubwomen engaged with and influenced the emerging social order that was taking shape in Johannesburg. In many ways, women's clubs were "nation-building projects" in which "women's projects of respectable self-fashioning and social transformation were intertwined" (Healy-Clancy 486). However, as Mgqwetho likely realized, "while respectability could empower, projects of racial uplift also hinged on a double marginalization of black women and men who did not conform to respectable standards of comportment" (Healy-Clancy 486).

Unfortunately, the ability to conform to "respectable standards" was not always an option for women forced into degrading circumstances by a bewildering array of legislated practices. The standards of middle-class respectability were too often unreasonable for women faced with limited income opportunities and intense competition for a meagre housing stock. Lower-class women who overcame the myriad dangers and difficulties associated with travel to Johannesburg would often have found themselves highly precarious circumstances when it came to housing and finances. Many Africans, and women in particular, "lived illegally on the city's fringes, as in Klipspruit, adjoining mines on sewage lands" (Limb 70). By 1930, the growing presence of women in urban areas prompted municipalities to prohibit single women from entering these areas, making their right to live in towns dependent upon their relationship to a husband or father who had already established his right to live and work there (Walker 42). Deborah Posel describes the extreme circumstances that these social transformations had created by the 1950s, citing the example of the "hat ceremony" in which "African men and women in search of state housing would assemble at the office of a Native Commissioner. While the women waited outside, the men were instructed to remove their hats, and leave the room. The hats were lined up on a table and the women filed in. Each on selected a hat, and was married, there and then, to its owner." With urban housing only available to married couples, the honored tradition of marriage became a function of necessity, in which "total strangers were instantly bound together in bureaucratically-fashioned relationships which conferred powers and responsibilities on wives and husbands in a murky and ill-defined approximation of well-established cultural norms of matrimony" (Posel 58).

Mgqwetho's later poems acknowledge the role of white institutions and legislation in damaging African social institutions, even as she calls on politically active women to address the

situation. In this poem published on 17 January 1925 she names Charlotte Maxeke specifically:

Namhla nitinina Ilizwe lifile	Now what do you say? The country's at war:
Nandzo ke ne Pasi usapo luwile	behold the pass, the death of our families.
……………………………….	………………………………………….
Vela Nkokelikazi Nto ka "Maxeke"	Come, woman leader, child of Maxeke,
Nabo abafazi bazizinxekenxeke	there are the women faffing about.
Namhlanje lihlazo kwindlu ze Afrika	Today there's dishonour in African homes,
Nomfula 'wehlazo' namhlanje siyemka.	we sink today in a stream of dishonour.
(Mgqwetho 274-75)	

Here Mgqwetho returns to a theme that occurs throughout her work, namely the devastating effect of segregationist legislation on African families, as she names the emotional weight of shame that accompanied such circumstances.

With relatively few women present in urban areas and with most bearing weighty domestic responsibilities, women were not included in the pass laws that increasingly regulated the movements of African men outside of land reserves. Indeed, the prospect of including women in pass laws was roundly condemned by black political organizations because of the threat these laws posed to African families and to women's safety. As Cherryl Walker (28) explains, "by imposing on women the risk of arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, passes directly threatened the well-being of the family. If mothers were taken off to gaol for falling foul of the pass laws, children would be neglected and the family would suffer" (28). Authorities often showed little concern for African families in other respects and it may be that the greater fear related to propriety and safety. Concerns about pass laws were not only related to women's role in the home but also the increased threat of sexual violence as the laws provided an occasion for men to accost women on the pretext of checking their passes.

Over the course of a decade of writing, Mgqwetho appears to grow increasingly aware of the complexity of the social and political situation for black South Africans in general and women in particular. If some poems—particularly earlier ones—appear to rail and scold, others are deeply sympathetic to the plight of Africans—and particularly African women—struggling to find their place in this "playground of strangers." The industrial modernity that Mgqwetho confronts in these

poems was inherently contradictory; while the Christian bible promised salvation, it was deeply implicated in colonialism, racism, the theft of land and destruction of valued African traditions. At the same time, the scriptures offered a means of grappling with dispossession and injustice, offering both historical precedent and hope. For instance, the epigraph of "Wazinyatela na? Intombi Zezwe Lako Zibe Ngamakoboka?" ("Are you trampling your nation's girls to enslave them?") invokes Nehemiah 5:5: "Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children: and, lo, we bring into bondage our sons and our daughters to be servants, and some of our daughters are brought unto bondage already: neither is it in our power to redeem them; for other men have our lands and vineyards" (*The Bible*). The significance of the epigraph is multilayered. Clearly, the suffering surrounding Mgqwetho was Biblical in proportion. Africans were unable to live as self-sufficient pastoralists as their ancestors had; land appropriation and tax laws had stripped them of this heritage, compelling them into wage labor equivalent to bondage in that the wages paid were too low to allow these workers ever to escape the oppressive drudgery. Yet just as Nehemiah and his followers rebuilt Jerusalem in defiance of Judah's enemies, so too could African heritage be reclaimed. Success at this monumental task would take courage, vision, and leadership, as well as unity among African peoples Mgqwetho's poems repeatedly call for.

Seeking a Ford

As a woman poet published in a newspaper financed by the Chamber of Mines, Mgqwetho's poetry is enmeshed in the labor and class politics of a fractured society in complicated ways. Her fiery words made visible the presence of women and women's leadership in a male-dominated world as she called on African women and men alike to rouse themselves and help Africa shake off the curse of foreign leadership and cultural influence. It is no coincidence that Mgqwetho found her voice in the 1920s; the decade of the flapper, in which women cut their hair, dropped their waistlines and kept their places in a workforce transformed by the First World War brought profound social change and new liberties for women in contexts around the world. For Nontsizi Mgqwetho, these changes came about not in the brief, bright flare of post-war prosperity, but against a backdrop of bitter racism and black economic crisis. Yet as much as the 1920s was a decade of women's emancipation, it was also a period of alarmed backlash that held women responsible for social ills and demanded their return to traditional standards of homemaking decency. As feminist activism, Mgqwetho's poetry is at times equivocal; while it speaks of and about the presence of women on the Rand, it also reflects the social anxieties that emerged during a transformative time in history. Like

writings from other locales that responded with a mix of joy and horror to rapid urbanization and to the corresponding shift in behaviors, social mores, modes of dress, and forms of leisure that it brought, Mgqwetho's poetry is both liberated and censorious. On one hand her work is an emancipatory, feminist force, a form anti-colonial activism that confronted and challenged the form of modernity and extractive industrialization that African peoples were forced to accept. On the other, she calls for moral propriety and disciplined behavior and admonishes women for licentiousness, calling for a return to tradition as antidote to social strife, though it was no doubt clear to her that, to use an amaXhosa metaphor, the cattle had already been stolen. As a woman faced with the contradictions and ambiguities of a traditional society undergoing rapid and profound upheaval, Mgqwetho acknowledges the complexity of the circumstances, in which these changes presented new opportunities for women that would not have been accessible a generation earlier. While many of Mgqwetho's poems criticize unrespectable behavior, others speak from the position of a rural traditionalist, offering varying possibilities and perspectives while casting doubt on a narrowly circumscribed version of respectability.

The politics of Mgqwetho's poetry extend far beyond shifting gender dynamics. Her poetry drives to the heart of fundamental questions about African culture and identity deeply shaken by a devastating new political order. Appearing as it does on the pages of a newspaper owned by the Chamber of Mines amid visual and written texts that uphold colonial wisdom and shift the burden of responsibility for the health and safety of African laborers from their dubious employers to Africans themselves, her work is inevitably part of a discursive machine that obscured and legitimated the racist capitalism of the new Union of South Africa. Even as she rails against the politics unfolding around her, she dismisses the more radical response of the rival newspaper *Abantu Batho*. Yet Mgqwetho's work is far too complex to fit easily into any critique of the biopolitics and middle-class convictions of the paper that published her work. Passionate and deeply personal, Mgqwetho's poems reflect her own sacrifices and sense of common cause with her audience. In this, her poetry was perhaps the "ford" she so often calls for, bridging the paper's biopolitical rhetoric with empathy for a suffering populace. Above all, Mgqwetho's poetry exhorts people to reflect on their circumstances, calling on them to speak out and act. Again and again, her poems demonstrate a profound faith in her people to rise to the challenges confronting them.

The end of the 1920s brought with it drastic economic shifts felt around the world. The crash of 1929 and the depression that followed brought an end to the liberation that women experienced earlier in the decade. Elsewhere in the world, as jobs dried up in the wake of the great

depression, women found themselves forced out of their newfound roles in the workplace and back into the domestic sphere. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Mgqwetho's final two poems were published at Christmas 1928 and New Year's 1928-29. What would she have had to say about the crisis of collapsed commodity prices that followed soon after? About the instatement of apartheid in the decade that followed? A poet "wont to raise dust," she would surely have roared.

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Notes

1. Note that Mgqwetho wrote and published in the orthography of isiXhosa that was current at the time and thus spellings are different than those of contemporary written isiXhosa. Even Mgqwetho's name varies in spelling; the form chosen for this paper reflects contemporary orthography and is the spelling used in contemporary discussions of her work. The translations provided are all taken from *The Nation's Bounty: the Xhosa Poetry of Nontsizi Mgqwetho*, a compilation of nearly all Nontsizi Mgqwetho's known work translated by Jeff Opland with assistance from Phyllis Ntantala, Abner Nyamende, and Peter Mtuze. Poetry is notoriously difficult to translate—particularly so between such vastly different linguistic forms and cultural traditions as English and isiXhosa. While disagreement exists regarding some of Jeff Opland's artistic choices, disagreements of this kind are certainly not unique to Mgqwetho's poetry. I am not aware of any other English translations of these poems. The present paper is limited by my reliance on these translations, in which the nuanced power of the original language is muted, and by my inability to read the multilingual content of *Umteteli wa Bantu* in full.
2. Baking powder advertisements appear in various languages; the English language ad reads in its entirety, "'Because"— A Woman's Reason and a Good One. If you ask any one of several million thoughtful women why she uses Royal Baking Powder instead of the cheaper kinds she will answer "Because— I know what I am eating. I know it has no alum in it. I know my food is wholesome. I know my baking will be right. I know it will keep fresh longer"'. The surprisingly familiar rhetoric reflects middle-class preoccupations with the contents, provenance, and purity

of foodstuffs that remain prominent to this day.

3. *Hlonipha* "concerns the conscious avoidance in [women's] every-day speech the syllables occurring in the husband's family's names" (Finlayson 138). Principles of *hlonipha* speech stipulate that women should not speak their surnames—particularly their married surnames—aloud.

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