

**ON AFRICANA/ISLAMICA EXISTENTIAL
THOUGHT: DON MATTERA AND THE QUESTION
OF *TRANSCENDENCE***

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgements, the work presented is entirely my own.

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Signed by candidate

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PORTRAIT OF DON MATTERA

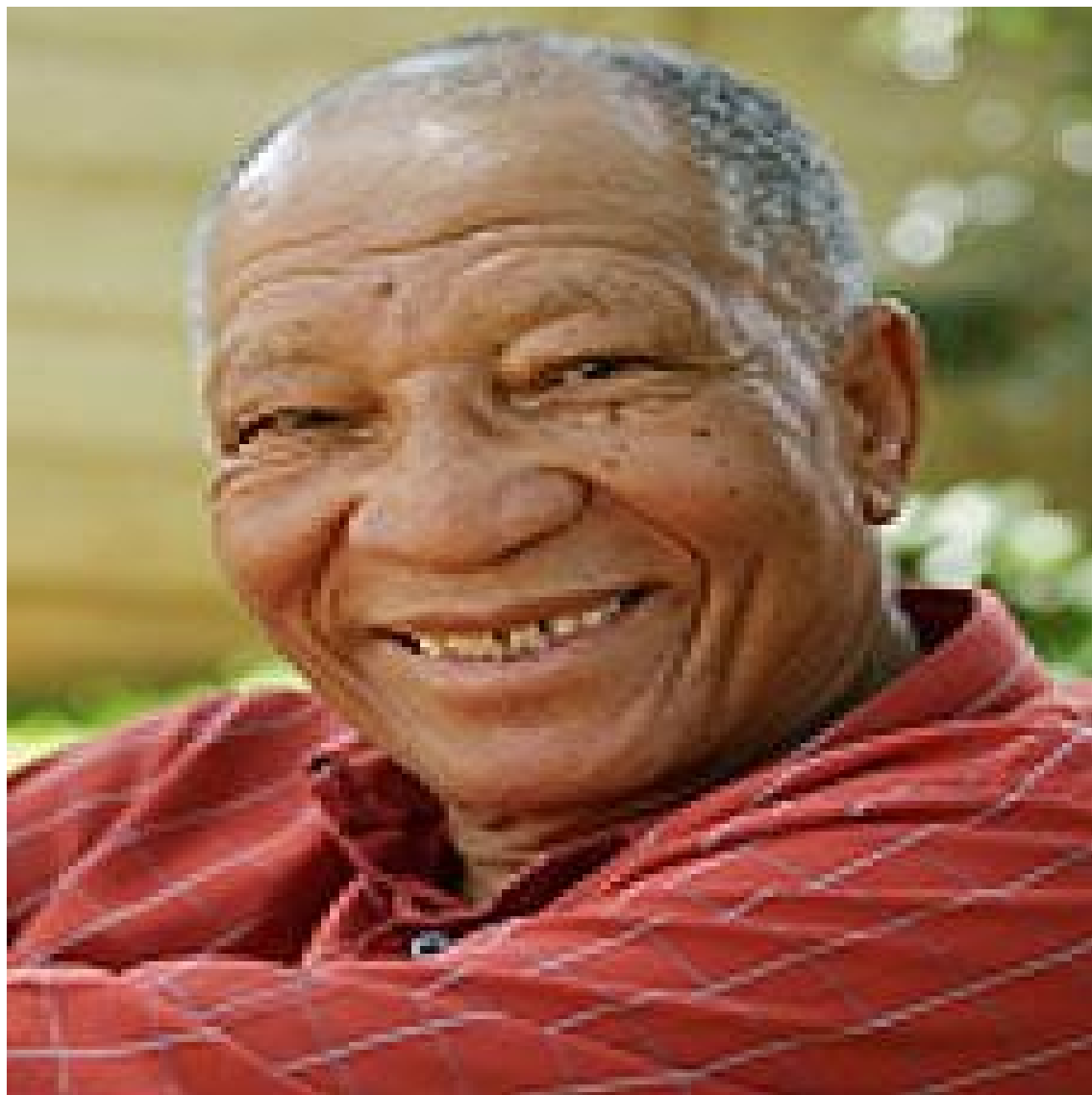


Photo Courtesy South African History Online (SAHO)

DEDICATION

For all his dislike for interviews, Don Mattera gave time whenever we met to share insights on different aspects of his life, work and writings. I cannot thank you sufficiently, 'Bra Don', for your selfless spirit and compassion. This work is dedicated to you and the Mattera clan and to the memory of my late father, uVakele Alfred Sitoto, who departed so early to the world of the unseen.

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ABSTRACT

Although a figure of many interests, Don Mattera remains one of the least studied figures in South African scholarship and intellectual history. This study combines two primary concerns. The first revolves around an imperative for a comprehensive study of Mattera. Linked to the first concern is the second, which is the challenge to find a method and a theoretical approach to read Mattera. In addition to being a poet of note, writer and journalist, Mattera is also known as a resilient activist and one of the critical voices in the Black Consciousness Movement of South Africa. Yet the little that is written on him is either limited to his role in youth gangs, even though he eschewed the life of gangsterism as far back as the mid-1950s, or, studied within the context of black South African writing in English. Hence, he is relegated to what is termed ‘literature of protest’ (Vancini 2006: 197). There is to date hardly any substantive writing on Mattera and his attachment to Islam despite the fact that he encountered Islam in the 1970s and considers his conversion (to Islam) one of the most significant milestones in his life. The interest expressed in Mattera in this study, therefore, is not limited to Mattera the poet and writer only; it also looks at Mattera as a black Muslim subject. The decision to read Mattera in this extended sense presented a theoretical challenge and informed the second concern and problem addressed in this study.

Given Mattera’s complexity and range of interests, the question of which method and theoretical approach would be ideal for a comprehensive reading of him has remained a challenge. In the end, after considering several disciplinary and methodological options, black/Africana existential thought and philosophy as a method and theoretical anchor was selected. This is because black/Africana existential thought and philosophy understood as ‘an

intertextually embedded discursive practice' facilitates a comprehensive reading and study on Mattera. Informed by a critical engagement with the data of this study, which consists of Mattera's poetry, fiction and public discourse where Mattera is read alongside Malcolm X, the perceived proclivity of black/Africana existential thought (and philosophy) to privilege a hermeneutic of struggle proved inadequate. The hypothesis presented in this study is that inasmuch as Mattera has been read through the lenses of struggle and protest, such a reading, and by inference, hermeneutic, fosters epistemic closure. For not only does it fail to earnestly consider categories such as Islam as a critical discursive concern within black/Africana existential thought and philosophy, it also, entrenches fossilised notions of black subjectivity and sense of self and being. Accordingly, as a reversal to the hermeneutic of struggle, this dissertation posits an alternative reading in a hermeneutic of transcendence. A hermeneutic of transcendence is attentive to Mattera's complex sense of self, identity and subjectivity that extends beyond the aesthetic evaluation of his literary output. Transcendence connotes a double meaning that captures both the Sartrean sense of intersubjective transcendence, as well as Levinasian sense of transcendence as a gesture towards the beyond and the metaphysical. I argue that a hermeneutic of transcendence provides an enriched reading of Mattera than the hermeneutic of struggle and protest.

Evasion has fostered another, substitute language in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate. (Morrison 1993: 9)

Thinking thought usually amounts to withdrawing into a dimensionless place in which the idea of thought alone persists. (Glissant [1990] 2010:1)

The [writing] style is the thinking itself. (Hofstadter 2001 [1971]:xvi)

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

And, in the end, it is a question of counterpoint [...]. I do it with no intention of entertaining anyone, nor with philosophical dignity [...] but rather as a poor pedestrian who measures the earth he treads with his footsteps [...]. At best, I shall have produced [...] a university thesis. (Michelstaedter 2007 [1910]: 4)¹

Background and Motivation for the Study

For a long time, I have been preoccupied with finding a concept that would best articulate and capture the complexity of black African Muslim identity, subjectivity and sense of self.² In other words, what does it mean to be black, African and Muslim in the world? That is, not so much as a fragmented identity and mode of being but rather as an identity where categories such as black, African and Muslim are integral aspects embedded within the same identity,

¹ Writing a dissertation is often a long, lonely and tedious process. In such moments, I found the words of Carlo Michelstaedter (1887–1910), among other resources, a source of inspiration. This quote is taken from his ‘Preface’ in *Persuasion and Rhetoric* and translated from the Italian text by Wilhelm Snyman and Giuseppe Stellardi. See Carlo Michelstaedter, *Persuasion and Rhetoric* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2007), p. 4.

² Undoubtedly, terms like subjectivity, self and identity, though complex and with varied meanings depending on the context in which they are used, will nevertheless be used in this study interchangeably. In particular, their usage will be informed by the discursive angle and context in which they are used in this study. For detailed discussion of these terms, see, for instance, Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2000). See also, Levin, Jerome, David. *Theories of the Self* (New York: Hemisphere Publishing Corporation, 1992).

sense of self and subjectivity. Accordingly, by foregrounding the African, and, by inference, black, intellectual output from figures who had gravitated to Islam in one way or another, this study initially set to explore such a neglected question. This question is neglected not only in Islamic studies but also, broadly speaking, in African scholarship and in black/Africana existential philosophy.

To ask, ‘What does it mean to be black, African and Muslim in the world?’ is undoubtedly a broad question. It had to be narrowed down into a manageable research focus, hence the topic of this dissertation. In particular, it was in the context of restricting the question, broad as it was, that the study has gravitated to a critical engagement with Mattera, his ideas, work and thought as a primary focus. However, gravitation to a focus on Mattera has prompted a further question: *why* Don Mattera and not any other figure besides him as a focal point of this study?

Locating Don Mattera in the Study: A Brief Personal Narrative

I have known and read the work of Mattera, especially what has now become one of the classics within South African autobiographical literature *Memory is the Weapon* (2009 [1987]), as well as his first anthology of published poetry, *Azanian Love Song* (2007 [1983]), years ago. However, at no stage did I imagine devoting an academic study, let alone an entire doctoral dissertation, to Mattera’s work and thought. This awakened interest and subsequent decision to focus on Don Mattera in this study, therefore, warrants some explanation. At best, this can be explained through a brief narrative that puts into context why Mattera and his work are so central in this study.

To be precise, it was around April 2006, during a seminar at one of the ‘Theological Cafés’³ run by what was named the School of Religion and Theology (and which has since been reconfigured as the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), when a colleague posed a question that has since changed my research focus. At the time, my research interest was on African Islam within the context of West Africa, with a view to focus on Ahmad Bamba’s ideas and thought beyond the Sufi saint. Paraphrased, the question was why the focus on West African Islam and by inference privilege a Muslim figure from that region and not a South African or an aspect of South African Islam? Although my response to the question was rather muted, there were, in reality, numerous factors that pulled me away from a South African focus or figure. For brevity, let me cite only two reasons.

First, when I decided to embark formally on doctoral studies, most experts in the field of Islamic studies were out of the country. As a result, I applied for a scholarship to study abroad. Initially, the research area was Senegal in West Africa, with a view to focus on reformist thought within Islam and, as stated, the thought and writings of Ahmadu Bamba, the founder of the pan-African Muridiyya Sufi order. The other reason for looking afar at West Africa (and not locally) was prompted by a desire to move away from what Mahmood Mamdani has described elsewhere as ‘South African exceptionalism’ (Mamdani 1996: 3–4). Mamdani was referring to a tendency within South African scholarship to focus exclusively on

³ The Theological Café represents a regular intellectual forum at the Pietermaritzburg campus of UKZN. Spearheaded by Gerald West – a scholar in Biblical Studies, the Café provides a space where colleagues and visiting scholars together with activists often share their work within the academic community.

South African issues as if what happens elsewhere in Africa is of no significance.⁴ As Mamdani

wrote:

[...] One would *first* have to take head-on the notion of South African exceptionalism and the widely shared prejudice that while South Africa is a part of Africa geographically, it is not quite culturally and politically, and certainly not economically. It is a point of view I find to be a hallmark of much of the South African intelligentsia, shared across divides [...].⁵

In retrospect, and without disowning Mamdani's observations, the reason to keep a distance from any South Africa-related topic was rather lame. The rationale at the time was based on a fear that being South African and therefore personally too close to the subject of African Muslims in the country might compromise the study's objectivity. This apprehension aside, the question of *why* a focus on West Africa and not on South Africa or on a South African figure refused to fade away. In short, on deciding finally to settle on South Africa and a South African figure, Don Mattera became the instant choice.⁶ The selection of Mattera, though, and, of course, the need to foreground African and black Muslim intellectual production, ways of self-

⁴ It must be noted though that the rhetoric of 'African scholarship' within South African universities has begun to reverse this tendency. See, for instance, Malegapuru William Makgoba's address on the occasion of his inauguration as Vice-Chancellor of UKZN: 'The African University: The Meaning, Penalties and Responsibilities.' Published as 'Towards African scholarship,' UKZN's Public Affairs and Communications Desk, September 30, 2005, pp. 11–18.

⁵ For a detailed discussion, see Mahmood Mamdani's 'Centre for African Studies: Some Preliminary Thoughts.' *Social Dynamics*, 22.2 (1996), pp. 1–14.

⁶ At this time I was back in South Africa and no longer registered in any formal study programme. It was during this interval that discussions with Professor Tayob, who was then back at UCT from a roughly five-year stint at Nijmegen University (Holland), resumed and the study on Mattera for this PhD project became more formalised.

identification and, by inference, subjectivity as a point of departure presented a serious theoretical challenge. In other words, *how* does one locate someone like Don Mattera, a poet, writer, editor, journalist, activist and orator, within an enquiry that would be able to capture all the nuanced dimensions of his otherwise rich career, life and thought? And how can this be done without, in the process, relegating his attachment to Islam or his sense of being a Muslim to the background?

Focus of Study

As a student of Islam, African thought and philosophy, this researcher's intellectual preoccupation over the last few years has been the search for a concept that could best articulate black African Muslim⁷ experience, thought and subjectivity, especially within the context of South African scholarship. While there are extensive studies in North America that have invariably focused on the African American Muslim experience, thought and prominent

⁷ As Betty Govindem has noted with reference to the usage of racial labels 'to designate population groups' – such labels are always 'inexact'. Accordingly, the label 'black African Muslim/s' as used in this study is not used as an 'exact' term nor in any essentialist sense. Rather, the term is used conveniently to describe those Muslims in South Africa who, because of various historical reasons, are not considered 'Muslim' in the popular sense of 'who' is understood as a Muslim in South Africa's stereotypical descriptions of Muslims as possessing a strictly Asian or Middle Eastern identity. See Devarakshanam Betty Govindem, 'Healing the Wounds of History: South African Indian Writing.' In *SA LIT Beyond 2000*. Edited by Michael Chapman and Margaret Lenta (Scottsville: UKZN Press, 2011), p. 283. See also Sindre Bangstad's 'Global Flows, Local Appropriations: Facets of Secularisation and Re-Islamisation Among Contemporary Cape Muslims' (Leiden: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), p. 25.

figures,⁸ there are few studies in South Africa that are exclusively dedicated to such an enquiry. To mention this is not to dismiss available literature, limited as it is, that has paid some attention to the presence of Islam among indigenous black Africans in the country. However, the main limitation with such academic literature (Abrahams 1981; Haron 1992; Vawda 1994; Lee 2001; Bangstad 2007) is that it often confines the treatment of black African Muslims to the singular theme and narrative of African conversion to Islam.⁹ As I have argued elsewhere, a preoccupation with ‘conversion narratives’ (Bangstad 2007: 57) precludes other insights and alternative ways of examining the black Muslim sector, and, more significantly, some of the critical voices within it ‘beyond the moment of conversion’.¹⁰ The quest to find alternative

⁸ A case in point is Edward Curtis IV’s *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation and Difference in African-American Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002). This study is based on a critical focus on five key figures that have played a central role in shaping what Curtis Jr refers to as ‘Modern African American Islamic thought’, namely: Edward Blyden, Noble Drew Ali, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X and Wallace D. Muhammad. See also Zafar Ishaq Ansari’s ‘W.D. Muhammad: The Making of a Black Muslim Leader.’ In *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 1985 (2), pp. 248–262). Aminah Beverly McCloud’s *African American Islam* (New York: Routledge, 1995). The latter serves as a critical introduction to internal diversity and history of African American Muslim communities. Also, two recent works by Sherman Jackson *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) and *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) are indicative of the kind of focus that ‘Blackamerican’ Islam, to use Jackson’s expression, is receiving in North American scholarship.

⁹ Although the term ‘conversion’ is complex, the usage here, unless stated otherwise, is in the limited sense that connotes acceptance of a different religion and belief system; and, in this instance, the reference is to the acceptance of Islam.

ways of writing and reading black African Muslim identity beyond ‘narratives of conversion’ (to Islam) has led to this dissertation being intentionally framed as a conceptual study, with an aim to interrogate and make sense of black African Muslim identity, sense of self and subjectivity. Hence, the study’s focus on a figure like Don Mattera.¹¹ However, it must be emphasised, the decision to focus on an individual figure does not imply that the dissertation is conceptualised as a biographical study in the conventional sense of a biography.

To distance this project from biography and, by inference, from its perceived constraints, the reference is specifically to biography’s propensity to confine the biographical subject to what Lewis Gordon has referred to as ‘the biographical moment’ and its ‘epistemic closure’ (2000: 11–30). Accordingly, Gordon’s remark is not to dismiss the merits of biographical studies. Rather, it is to flag how through biography, the thought and ideas of the biographical subject, especially in the context of most black biographies, tend to be relegated to the background. This is not to say that biography cannot be utilised as a critical method. As Coullie (2009) and Linda Anderson (2001) have shown in their respective studies, feminist scholars often resort to biography (as well as autobiography) as a deliberate method to capture

¹⁰ See author’s essay, ‘*Scripting Black African Muslim Presence in South African Islam: A Quest for Self-Understanding beyond the Moment of Conversion*’, *Islamic Africa*, 9(2) [Forthcoming]. See also, Thabang Nkuna’s recent study, although saddled with the politics of blackness, an attempt to make some theological argument for a Black Muslim identity and bemoaning ‘how’ the latter identity is ‘side-lined’ in the ‘South African history of Islam’, this work represents a rare addition to materials on Black Muslim identity in South Africa. See Thabang Nkuna, ‘On Being Black & Being Muslim in South Africa, Explorations into blackness and Spiritualism.’ Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Witwatersrand, 2016.

¹¹ A detailed biographical portrait of Don Mattera is presented in Chapter Two.

subjugated social histories, and also to foreground thought and ways of thinking from repressed, censored and erased voices (Anderson 2001: 16).

Likewise, black scholars, especially historians, have equally devised different strategies where biography is often used as a method to write black subjects and their subjectivities back into history as *thinking* rather than as passive subjects. An illustrative case of such an approach is in Mokoena's study on one of the early converts to Christianity among the isiZulu speakers: *Magema kaFuze: The Making of a Kholwa Intellectual* (2011). In this study, Mokoena has organised her work 'around' what she refers to as 'a set of dialogues and contestations that Fuze conducted with his readers and critics' (2011: 19). While Mokoena perceives her work as 'a biographical study', her strategy intentionally foregrounds Fuze's thought and ideas as the centre of her study.

Also, 'The Individual, Auto/biography and History in South Africa' (2004) by Ciraj Rassool, which is based on one of the late leaders of the New Unity Movement, is another excellent example of a critical yet self-reflexive critique of the biographical method. In particular, Rassool reflects on the production of history through the different constructions of I.B. Tabata's biographies and crafts what he regards as an alternative 'theory' to conventional biography.¹²

¹² See Ciraj Rassool's appraisal in Colin Bundy's *Govan Mbeki* (Johannesburg: Jacana 2012), p. 154. Also, Richard A. Hutch's extensive work on Biography' and 'Autobiography' serves as another work that provides a counterpoint to the critique on biography. Also, it presents biography as 'a method' capable of offering a far more comprehensive 'study of lives.' See Richard A. Hutch, *Biography, Autobiography, and the Spiritual Quest* (London: Continuum, 1997).

Although these strategic uses of biography have been noted and the fact that some biographical portrait of Mattera is unavoidable, this study is not intended as a biographical work. On the contrary, the focus in this study is more on a search for a holistic and critical intellectual profile of Mattera in line with the central research concern and questions pursued in this dissertation.

Between ‘Obscurity’ and ‘Reception’: Why a Dissertation on Don Mattera Matters?

What is ironic about Don Mattera is that while he is one of the most famous poets and writers of the Sophiatown and post-Sophiatown eras, he is, the least written about. Moreover, if South African scholarship and literary scholarship in particular are thin on Mattera, there is almost nothing substantive written on him and his identification with Islam.¹³ Given Mattera’s prominence, this neglect in both instances is rather baffling. This is not to suggest that there is nothing written on him by literary scholars or that there is no interest in his work. On the contrary, it became evident quite early in this research that there was a growing fascination with Mattera’s work, especially within the subcultural world of hip-hop artists and young budding poets.¹⁴ In February 2009, for example, Ntsiki Mazwai, a young female performing poet, teamed up with the hip-hop artist Max-Hoba and the two staged a musical production that

¹³ Except, of course, for the occasional critic who would at least drop a sentence to indicate Mattera’s connection with Islam and usually in a fleeting remark. See, for instance, Stephen Gray’s review, ‘Raw testimony of life in Sophiatown,’ *Die Suid-Afrikaan*, June 1988, and pp. 44–45.

¹⁴ In the words of Lebo Mashile, a recognised poet herself and an occasional presenter on South African television, Mattera is, in the world of these young artists and poets, ‘literally’ a living icon and the most revered ‘celebrity’. Conversation with Mashile at the Women’s Celebration month held in Durban, where she and Mattera were invited guests. Durban, August 8, 2011.

was, according to Mazwai, an ‘interpretation’¹⁵ of Mattera’s first anthology of poetry, *Azanian Love Song*. Also, Mattera is a recipient of three honorary doctorates from South African universities, namely the former University of Natal in 1999, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in April 2009 and the University of South Africa (UNISA) in September 2011.

However, popularity and academic accolades have not necessarily translated into any significant scholarly work on Mattera. An extensive literature search at the Centre for African Literary Studies (CALS) at UKZN¹⁶ and a later one at the National English Literary Museum (NELM) in Grahamstown revealed the blindness of the South African literary scholarly community towards Mattera and his work. At NELM alone, the search engine found ‘173 records’ of material related to him. Yet besides some isolated book reviews on his early work, studies on Mattera remain few and isolated. With the reprinting of *Memory is the Weapon* in 2009, one would have thought it would receive substantive attention under works devoted to South African autobiographical writings. But Anne Gagono’s recent stock-taking essay ‘Family Albums and Statements from the Dock of History: Autobiographical Writing 1999–2009’ (2011: 259–282) has failed to refer to Mattera’s autobiography. This omission belies the fact that when the book first appeared, it received acclaim from a wide range of South Africans

¹⁵ See Ntsiki Mazwai, ‘My Poems Made Me’. Available: <http://www.lovelife.org.za/cool-xtras/amaqhawe-heroes/ntsiki-mazawai-my-poems> [2013, July 19].

¹⁶ CALS has one of the most impressive collections of African literature in the country and it received an additional boost when Bernth Lindfors’ lifetime collection on African literature was relocated from the University of Texas to CALS.

across the literary and political spectrum. At the time of its publication, Nadine Gordimer described Mattera's autobiography as a work of 'conviction, courage and humour combined with a natural gift for narration to produce an exhilarating story' (from the blurb for *Memory is the Weapon* 2009 [1987]). The late father Huddleston referred to the autobiography as a work that represents the voice not only of 'a poet' but also of a 'historian and a prophet too'. These remarks also resonate in Dennis Brutus' reflections on the book: 'Mattera's image of Sophiatown' and his 'vibrant writing powerfully evokes' the troublesome history of South Africa and its 'places' (from the blurb for *Memory is the Weapon* 2009 [1987]).

Notwithstanding these glowing tributes, *Memory is the Weapon* remains a neglected text. This is unlike the attention that Bloke Modisane's *Blame Me on History* (1986 [1963]) and Es'kia Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* (1962) have received. For example, Mphahlele is a subject of numerous studies and dissertations (see Rafapa 2006; Gwala 1989; Manganyi 1981), and critical essays and memorial lectures have been held in tribute to Bloke Modisane, with constant reference to his autobiography as a 'memorable work' (see Abiola Irele 2004: 3). References are made to Modisane's and Mphahlele's autobiographies not as attempts to evaluate the latter two autobiographies with Mattera's autobiography. Rather it is to stress the seemingly ongoing neglect of the various aspects of Mattera's literary contributions within South African scholarship.

What is even more surprising about the neglect of Mattera within literary scholarship in South Africa, especially given the fact that he is a public poet of note, is that even in the treatment of the so-called Soweto poets or poets of Black Consciousness, there is hardly any significant attention given to Mattera's poetry by South African scholars. As Barnett has argued, Mattera's poems 'were the first to sound a note of "black power"' (quoted in Killian

1994: 71; see also Ngwenya 2012: 50–52). Except for two marginal references to Mattera – one in a chapter by Sipho Sephamla (2007: 118) and a second by Achmat Dangor (2007: 131), Chapman’s *Soweto Poetry: Literary Perspectives* (2007 [1982]) has totally erased Mattera’s contributions from so-called Soweto poetry. Likewise, David Attwell in *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History* (2005) entrenches the prevailing practice within South African literary scholarship – that is, to reserve the designation ‘Soweto poetry’ for what Attwell has described as ‘the quartet most commonly associated with the term “Soweto Poetry”’ (Attwell 2005: 137; see also Mzamane 1987), namely Oswald Mtshali, Sipho Sepamla, Mafika Gwala and Mongane Serote. Attwell’s work does not make a single mention of Mattera. Ironically, members of the ‘quartet’ were contemporaries of Mattera. However, contrary to the wedge driven by South African literary scholars, there is evidence of mutual respect for and embracing of their respective works among this generation of black South African writers and poets. Mongane Serote, for example, one of the prominent voices of the ‘Soweto quartet’ to whom the bulk of Chapter 5 (‘The Lyric and Epic: The Ideology of Form in Soweto Poetry’) in Attwell’s book is devoted, wrote a poem titled ‘Don M. ---’ as a tribute to a fellow poet on the occasion of Mattera’s banning.

Given Mattera’s ‘fame’ (see Mangcu 2012: 64), one would think that he would be the subject of numerous studies by now. This is clearly not the case. Of course, there are a few studies dealing with analyses of various aspects of South African literature during and immediately after apartheid that have referred to his work. In particular, Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre undertook in the late 1970s one of the early studies in which Mattera receives

significant attention; this work was originally in the form of a doctoral dissertation in French.¹⁷ The study was then published as *L'Apartheid et la Poésie Engagée Sud-Africaine de Langue Anglaise* (1981) before being translated into English and published as *Poetry of Commitment* (1984). Although not based exclusively on Mattera's work, Alvarez-Pereyre's work is arguably one of the most 'comprehensive' studies, as noted by the late Dennis Brutus (1987), to analyse South African defiance poetry. In particular, Mattera's poetry receives significant attention within chapters analysing the work of black South African poets (Alvarez-Pereyre 1984).

A rare attempt to engage Mattera's work exclusively in a systematic fashion emerges much later in the mid-1990s. This is in the form of an honours study done at the former Vista University in Port Elizabeth by Yasmin Kathleen Killian: 'Language, Identity and Alienation in the Work of Don Mattera' (1994). Giving her recognition of and explanation of Mattera's erasure by the South African literary community, Killian identifies the decade-long banning order that was imposed on Mattera by the then apartheid government as a possible cause for what she calls his 'obscurity' (see also Merret 1994: 199–200).¹⁸ She then argues that the

¹⁷ For this information, I am indebted to Dennis Brutus' address 'Liberation and Literature' at the 'First Conference on South African English Literature, November 7–9, 1986' held in Germany, where Mattera, among others, was a panelist. See also Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre's article 'Pour Saluer Don Mattera' In *Genève Afrique*, 1980, 18 (2), pp. 117–123. (The article consists of a side-by-side translation of four of Mattera's poems into French.)

¹⁸ Killian's view finds support in Christopher Merret's study on the adverse effects of censorship on South African writing. And in regard to creative writing, Merret refers specifically to Don Mattera as an example of a writer whose career was badly affected by laws of censorship. See Christopher Merret's *A Culture of Censorship, Secrecy and Intellectual Repression in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1994), pp. 195–201.

banning and the fact that Mattera has mainly used the medium of poetry and ‘not novels’ have contributed to his ‘marginalisation’. As a corrective to Mattera’s marginalisation, Killian’s work is driven by two main objectives. First, in her words, it is ‘to give recognition’ to writers who took up the cudgels ‘to work’ for a society free from oppression. Second, it is ‘to establish Mattera’s rightful place in South African writing and culture’ (Killian 1994: 1). Killian then identifies Mattera not only as a critical voice whose ‘character has yet to be identified,’ but more significantly, as a voice that ‘should not be forgotten in the transitional phase’ (Killian 1994: 1). It was a pioneering study on Mattera that belies the fact that it was offered as an honours project. It is unfortunate that Killian has not extended her work on Mattera beyond the honours level.

In addition to Killian’s study, a doctoral dissertation on ‘Post-Apartheid Emerging Identities in South African Literature’ (2007) by Mashige Mashadu (2007) devoted a chapter on an analysis of Mattera’s poetry. This is done under the rubric of ‘Black consciousness poetry’, and, in a sense, compensates for Mattera’s exclusion from the latter designation in Attwel. Thus, taken together, Alvarez-Pereyre, Killian and Mashadu’s work can be viewed as representing the few studies that have undertaken an engagement with Mattera’s poetry in some detail. By referring to the aforementioned studies at this stage, the main purpose is neither to critique them nor to analyse them yet. These works are treated under Chapter Four, which is devoted exclusively to an analysis of Mattera’s poetry. The purpose for now is only to map and thus indicate the extent to which Mattera’s work has been received or neglected within South African scholarship.

As this survey illustrates, Mattera, as Killian correctly asserts, undoubtedly remains one of the most understudied of South Africa’s literary figures. This is ironic – and more so if one considers his literary achievements. While Killian’s explanation for what she considers to be

the reasons for Mattera's 'obscurity' is plausible, it does not offer a full explanation for his neglect. When Mattera's work is taken and read together, working up from his apartheid to his post-apartheid writings, it constitutes an impressive body of work that is worth studying. While this reason alone would be a sufficient incentive for any researcher with a keen eye to work on an under-studied subject, and thus justify a full-scale study on Mattera, it should be clear by now that my interest in Mattera stems rather from this dissertation's underlying research question and preoccupation. And that is, as a black and African subject and intellectual figure, how can Mattera be studied and read within the context of African intellectual history and thought, where his black, African and Muslim sense of self is not accorded a secondary status but gets critical attention?

Given the tendency to ignore Islam as a critical signature of African identity or black subjectivities, what mode of reading would ensure that Mattera's attachment to Islam as a critical aspect of his identity is not neglected? Arguably, the failure to appreciate the Islamic component as integral to black and African subjectivities in figures like Mattera rest largely with narrow essentialist framings of Africanity and black and African identities. And it is due to such a neglect of Islam in regard to black and African subjectivities that few African scholars, especially those working within African philosophy like the Senegalese Bachir Diagne (2008; and Subair Naseem 2002), have called for an expansive view of Africanity and ways of being black and African.

The contention, especially with reference to African philosophical writing, is that as long as African philosophers do not take engagement with Islam seriously, such representations of Africanity and African identity, and by inference thought and philosophy, would remain distorted. Diagne (2008), in particular, captures this view in the plea he makes to scholars working within African philosophy to take engagement with the African Islamic intellectual

traditions, such as those buried in the Timbuktu manuscripts, more seriously, not only in terms of their historical significance for the purposes of writing African history (Jeppie 2008; Mathee 2011)¹⁹ but also as an archive that could be researched to expand the ways of writing African philosophy and thought more inclusively. Thus, Diagne insists, ‘it is impossible to give a proper account of the history of philosophy in the African continent while ignoring totally the significance of the penetration of Islamic knowledge in Africa’. Diagne’s subtext is that the act of *writing* that came via Islamic intellectual heritage in Africa also entailed, in a deeper sense, a form of ‘self-rewriting’ and an expanded sense of being African beyond an essentialist framing of African identity (2008: 19–21).

The thrust of Diagne’s concerns on the erasure of Islam from the African philosophical enterprise is also taken up by Achille Mbembe in a very dense but provocative essay ‘African Modes of Self-Writing’ (2002), as it is by Kwame Anthony Appiah in his seminal study *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (1992). The work of these two authors is marked by a persuasive call for inclusive ways of *writing* and *thinking* about the meaning of African self-understanding and identities in the world. Mbembe questions how ‘racial and territorial authenticity are conflated’, that is, where belonging to the ‘Black race’, in particular, becomes the sole criteria for being African. Mbembe’s argument is that the privileging of racial belonging as the only prerogative for ‘determining what is African and what is not’ is too restrictive. In other words, it disqualifies the possibility ‘that Africans might have multiple

¹⁹ Shahid Mathee’s PhD dissertation where the Timbuktu manuscripts are used as an example to make sense of the ‘social history’ of the area is a case in point. See Shahid Mathee, ‘Timbuktu’s Women and Muftis, 1907–1960: History through Timbuktu’s Fatwas.’ PhD Dissertation, University of Cape Town, 2011.

ancestries' and, by inference, traditions and cultures that over time have become part of the African experience (Mbembe 2002: 6). The same argument informs the content of most of Appiah's intellectual project. Very much like Mbembe, Appiah calls for an inclusion and thus an affirmation of Africa's and Africans' 'multiple attachments' to their identities. As Appiah asserts, it demands Africans to remember that what constitute African identity in the broadest sense are 'endogenous' and 'exogenous' cultural traditions: those internal to Africa and those that came through external influences. Hence, Appiah advocates an enquiry into African identity to seek 'a negotiable middle way' (Appiah 1992: ix-x). However, there are hardly any significant studies that, besides debunking essentialist notions of African identity, spell out how the 'middle way' that Appiah calls for should be conceptually and theoretically conducted. This is a critical question, especially if one considers the criticism toward an inclusive African identity that is posed by black and African scholars such as the Nigerian Wole Soyinka and the African American leading Afrocentrist Molefi Asante.²⁰ The common thread between the last mentioned is their prejudiced stance toward Islam (and, for that matter, Christianity) as something imposed upon and thus foreign to Africa and Africans. Soyinka captures the latter's stance on Islam more emphatically in the following statement:

I object very strongly to any notion which suggests that Africa is either Christian or Islamic [...] Africa was conquered by civilizations which claimed as their authority both Christianity and Islam, and our authentic being, authentic culture was submerged and really subverted by these two religions. (Soyinka 2001: 171)

It is significant to note that Soyinka's strong statement is not from his creative works but rather from an extensive interview he had with Jeyifo Biodun and which was subsequently published as *Conversations with Wole Soyinka* (2001; see also Wright 2002: 12-16). Soyinka's views

²⁰ Asante is discussed at length in Chapter Three.

from the aforementioned interview can thus be viewed as a fair summation of his general position on Islam as a component of Africanness or African identity. This is in sharp contrast to the arguments presented by Mbembe and Appiah, who at least acknowledge that indigenous forms of Islam or any tradition that has taken firm roots in Africa naturally becomes African. The latter view not only offers a rebuttal to the simplistic dismissal of Islam as either ‘foreign’ and thus ‘alien’ to Africanness but also, to recall Appiah, ‘a middle way’ that takes full account of the many strands that constitute an inclusive sense of being African in the world (Appiah 1992: ix–x; see also Mbembe 2002: 239–273).

While agreeable to the position held by Appiah, Mbembe and others sharing similar views – a position that finds empirical support in the extensive body of research and writings dealing with indigenised or ‘translated’ traditions in Africa such as Islam (and Christianity) – it is not the intention of this study to regurgitate those debates here. Parviz Morewedge (1998) and others like Sulayman Nyang (1999) regard Ali Mazrui, for example, as someone who has made the most ‘original contributions’ in foregrounding Islam as a critical category worth analysis in African intellectual thought and identities. This view is discussed at length in ‘The Onyx Crescent: Ali A. Mazrui on the Islamic/Africa Axis’, where Morewedge offers a careful analysis of Mazrui’s work, referring to him as the ‘insider of the Islam/Africa phenomenon’ and hence the ideal ‘ambassador’ to deal with the Islamic and African dimensions of such a ‘dual relationship’ (1998: 123–124). In particular, Morewedge draws attention to how Mazrui has, through his ‘trademark’ concept of the triple heritage, interpreted Islam as a component of African identity and thus as not an illegitimate attachment.

While agreeable to Morewedge’s assertion that Mazrui’s vast contribution to the study of Islam as an integral component to Africa is impressive, what is lacking in Mazrui’s significant body of work or ‘Mazruiana’, as it is sometimes called, is a meta-theoretical

reflection on the very meaning of the affirmed Islamic component within Africa's heritage and identities. In other words, inasmuch as Mazrui has written about Islam as one of the critical signatures of African identity, the reference to Islam in Mazruiana is often deployed in a limited sense. That is, to signify that Africa is not a monocultural but a multicultural continent whose identity is underpinned by its 'triple heritage' (African indigenous culture, Islam and Christianity).²¹ Mazrui's notion of Africa's triple heritage is captured further in Nyang's work, especially his *Islam, Christianity and African Identity* (1999). One might even add that Nyang's work reads more like an apologia for the other two dimensions of the triple heritage, namely Islam and Christianity, and their enduring 'legacy' in Africa. This is not to say Nyang does not acknowledge some of the brutalities that were committed in the name of these two 'Abrahamic religions'. However, unlike Wole Soyinka, Nyang's underlying tone is one that sees the African encounter with the latter traditions as 'beneficial' to the general well-being of Africans and therefore as compatible with their identities (Nyang 1999: 17; see also pp. 105–110).

Instead of dwelling at length on Nyang's position here, it might be useful at this point to also refer to Lamin Sanneh, who also represents scholars who have written extensively on

²¹ It is this mainly descriptive and limited application of Islam, among other issues, that has given Mazrui's critics ammunition to accuse him of valorising the Islamic presence in Africa and on African identities. What is often termed 'the decade-long acrimonious exchange between Mazrui and Soyinka' provides a preview of the kinds of accusations that Mazrui's critics have heaped on him. See Zine Magubane's 'Mazrui as Debater: Passion, Power and Polemic in Africanist Scholarship.' In *The Mazruiana Collection Revisited: Ali A. Mazrui debating the African condition – an annotated and select thematic bibliography 1962–2003*. Compiled by Abdul Samed Bemath (New Delhi: New Dawn Press, 2005), pp. 338–353; see also Molar Ongundipe-Leslie's 'Beyond Hearsay and Academic Journalism: The Black Woman and Ali Mazrui.' In *The Global African: A Portrait of Ali A. Mazrui*. Edited by Omari H. Okole (Trenton: AWS, 1998), pp. 249–258.

Islam and its relationship with Africanity. If the recurrent theme in the works of Mazrui and Nyang is that of the triple heritage – that Indigenous African traditions, Islam and Christianity are signatures of Africanity – Sanneh broaches Africa's relationship with these traditions through the notion of 'translation'. Nevertheless 'translation' is not only deployed by Sanneh to connote linguistic translation; it also implies cultural translation of the two Abrahamic traditions in Africa, namely Islam and Christianity. Without providing a caricature of Sanneh's unquestionable insights into Islam and Christianity in Africa, the main limitation with Sanneh's approach is his rather unbalanced comparative stance. This is Sanneh's desire to prove that Christianity is more 'translatable' than 'non-translatable' Islam. This position is advanced quite strongly in his essay 'Translatability in Islam and Christianity in Africa: A Thematic Approach' (1994: 22–45).

However, recent works by scholars currently writing on Islam in Africa have pointed out some of the missing gaps in Sanneh's notion of a 'non-translatable' Islam in Africa. In particular, this is pointed out in studies that focus on works dealing with what is referred to as *ajami* scripts or scripts using Arabic letters but expressed in African languages such as Kiswahili, Wolof and Hausa, to mention only a few (see Loimeier 2005: 403–423; Brigaglia 2005: 424–449). Notwithstanding which tradition is translatable or 'non-translatable', especially with regard to the recognition of Islam as a component of African identity, by drawing attention to the aforementioned literature, the purpose is to delineate how the focus and objectives of the present study are premised on a different set of concerns from the literature highlighted.

Method, Questions Considered and Theoretical Approach

This study is not interested in the polemics of whether Islam is more or less translatable or ‘non-translatable’, than, say, Christianity among Africans or, more generally, among its black subjects. Nor is the study’s interest in making a case for Islam as a critical component of African identity as Mazrui does, for example, through the idea of the ‘triple heritage’. Rather, the focus in this study is different and hence premised on a different preoccupation and order of questions.

In the main, this study maintains that the pressing and neglected question in so far as Islam among black and African subjects is concerned is not in regard to its presence as an aspect of African identity. Islam’s long historical presence among Africans and sections of her diaspora is already an existential reality. Besides Islam’s presence, the critical question is this: since Islam is a factor of black and African identities, *how* can one make sense of the Islamic or black Muslim self as a critical question of enquiry? In other words, beyond the context of social and collective identities, what mode of enquiry could best capture a critical interpretation of black African Muslim sense of self, subjectivity and mode of being in the world? Can such a question, for example, be pursued within the context of conventional Islamic studies? Or, would the question, because of its emphasis on matters black and African, presuppose Africana studies as the ideal location for such an enquiry? In particular, the latter questions inform the method and theoretical approach to Mattera in this study. That is, what mode of inquiry would best facilitate a comprehensive study of Mattera as a black, African Muslim subject?

Preliminary Note on Africana/Islamica Existential Thought as a Conceptual and Theoretical Approach

Philosophical questions also pertain to conditions of possibility. These are what must be understood for there to be the emergence of a certain idea or concept. (Gordon 2008: 12)

The role of the believing interlocutor as a significant partner in the history of religions begs some distinct discussion. We have seen him and increasingly her in the history of Islamic studies. (Tayob 2011: 507)

If anything, the last set of questions indicate a need to find an open and thus a fluid, rather than a ready-made, analytical method and theoretical approach for this study. It is for this reason that in conceptualising this dissertation, conventional and neat disciplinary divides had to be collapsed. The study draws from Africana studies, or, more specifically, from Africana existential thought and philosophy and brings the latter into a critical interface with Islam. To this end, the formulation of Africana/Islamica existential thought (and philosophy) speaks directly to this search for an adequate method that seeks to combine seemingly unrelated categories and fields of study. In short, the postulated concept therefore serves as a useful bridge to foreground the dialectic and theoretical interface that happens when categories that are generally understood as ‘Islamic’ and ‘African/Black’ are treated together – that is, not as irreconcilable opposites but rather as compatible categories worth examining. Accordingly, from such a theoretical stance, this study is conducted from the intersection between Africana existential philosophy and Islam, as well as from insights from literary studies.

My choice of method and theoretical approach is not in any way based on an irresponsible ‘theoretical eclecticism’ (Read 2003: 15; see also Best & Kellner 1991: 270). On the contrary, it is informed by how this dissertation is conceptualised. The materials and data encountered during the research process have demanded a more fluid, open and interdisciplinary approach.

For instance, it became clear as the research progressed that not only were there sufficient grounds for foregrounding Gordon's notions of black or 'Africana existential philosophy' as the conceptual and theoretical anchor for this dissertation but that it also was necessary to add what I consider to be Tayob's approach within Islamic studies. By Tayob's approach, what is meant is his extensive use of the notion of discourse or 'a discourse centred analysis' in dealing with Islam, Muslim experiences and various aspects of Islamic thought (see Tayob 1996; 1999; 2009).

To single out Tayob is not to suggest that he is the only Islamic studies scholar who has privileged a discourse-centred analysis as a preferred method. For example, in a recent paper that reviews 'the study of Islam within the history of religions', Tayob delineates what he identifies as 'three important theoretical moments in the study of Islam', namely the 'phenomenological', the 'contextual' and the 'reading [of] Islam as discourse'. Under this last category, he credits Talal Asad for promoting 'the discursive model' in the study of Islam. In addition to Asad, he also includes and appraises other scholars like John Bowen, Armando Salvatore and Saba Mahmood for equally promoting the study of Islam as 'a discursive tradition' (Tayob 2010; Tayob 2016: 161 – 182; see also Voll 2010: 3–16). Notwithstanding this deferral to other scholars in the field and hence downplaying his own work, it is conceded here that Tayob is one of the most consistent scholars to use a discourse-centred approach as a theoretical and interpretive tool in the field of Islamic studies.

Writing on the notion of Islamic resurgence in an insightful but perhaps neglected study titled *Islam in South Africa: Mosques, Imams, and Sermons* (1999), Tayob gives an astute meaning to the idea of Islamic resurgence and, by inference, Islamic activism. This is done through a skilful analysis of selected sermons based on two South African mosques. 'Discourse' as an analytical tool is then flagged prominently in three of the book's chapters.

‘The Sermon in Islam: A Discursive and Religious Symbol in History’ is how the book’s first chapter is framed. Its next chapter (Two) is titled ‘Creation of the Cape Mosque Discourse’ and Chapter Seven is titled ‘Sermons and the Re-citation of Discourses’. Also, if anything, Tayob’s theoretical signature where premium is given to discourse as an operative method is written all over his recent book *Religion in Modern Islamic Discourse* (2009). Though requiring an extensive review on its own, the latter work is based on a careful analysis of the concept ‘religion’ as a fluid concept or what he calls ‘an anchor point’ for understanding modern Islam. That is, ‘in which Muslims of diverse backgrounds’ contest the meanings of Islam in the modern world (2009: 182–183).

Considering that most of Tayob’s early writings (1990; 1995; 1996; 1999) are more focused on South Africa (though lately he has begun to broaden his focus), it makes sense to register some theoretical indebtedness to some of his insights of a discourse-centred approach within Islamic studies. Accordingly, even though the focus in this study is on an unconventional figure,²² writer, thinker and activist like Mattera, Tayob’s insights within Islamic studies have helped to facilitate the situation of Don Mattera not only as a Muslim subject but also as a discursive subject for Africana existential thought and philosophy.

As the narrative shows so far, it should be clear that the interdisciplinary bias in this study is not arbitrary but emanates from the study itself. In other words, the kinds of questions

²² An unconventional figure in the sense that Don Mattera is not treated in this study in the context of the more well-known conventional Muslim personalities from mainstream Muslim quarters of, say, North Africa, the Middle East or Asia like Sayyid Qutb, Hassan Al-banna, Maududi or Shariati, to mention only a few. See, Robert D. Lee’s *Overcoming Tradition and Modernity: The Search for Islamic Authenticity* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997). The focus of Lee’s study is on Iqbal, Qutb, Shariati, and Arkoun.

raised and imperative to interpret the study's data more comprehensively have imposed a bias towards an interdisciplinary approach. Support for this approach can also be found in arguments advanced by Mouton (1996) and Creswell (2003). Both Mouton and Creswell have argued in favour of an approach that fosters a more pluralistic, pragmatic and therefore open method to knowledge production.

As for a word about the intersection between Africana existential philosophy and literature, again this option is informed by the very choice of working on someone like Don Mattera. Judging from what his peers had to say – and being no less a significant figure than the very father of African letters, the late Es'kia Mphahlele – Mattera is considered a prominent poet and literary figure, despite his neglect within South African literary circles (Mphahlele 2007; Magubane 1989). Thus, even though the emphasis in this study is not so much based on an extensive examination of the aesthetics of Mattera's literary production, to ignore insights from literary theories (and criticism) would be irresponsible.

To return to an engagement with Africana existential philosophy, while Gordon cautions against conflating the latter with European existential philosophy (2000: 6–10), it is still deemed necessary in the process of reading Mattera to reference some of the European philosophers and thinkers writing within the existentialist traditions, with a view to underpin what is implied by 'existentialist thought and philosophy' in this dissertation more explicitly. Thus, selected references to some of the main philosophers associated with existentialist philosophy such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Levinas and Soren Kierkegaard, is unavoidable. Admittedly, reference to such thinkers makes it difficult to dispense with what Chakrabarty has described as the 'indispensable power' of 'the universals propounded by European Enlightenment thought' (Chakrabarty 2000: 254–255). To say this, though, is not to slavishly mimic or uncritically endorse European thought and its universalising narratives. Instead, it is

to underpin the challenge of dealing with ‘translational histories’ (as noted by Chakrabarty) and, by inference, epistemologies (see Miller 1993: 225).

Now, to cite Chakrabarty, who clearly works within a postcolonial theoretical framework, it must be added that while Don Mattera may easily fit the description of ‘the postcolonial subject’, there is no intention to burden this dissertation with postcolonial theory. This is not to dismiss the efficacy of postcolonial theory. On the contrary, as Rafapa in his study on Es’kia Mphahlele, whom he frames as a ‘post-colonial writer and theorist’, has shown, postcolonial theory when used cautiously can mitigate against some of the harsh criticism levelled against it (Rafapa 2006: 242). Some of this criticism pertains to postcolonialism or postcolonial theorists’ tendency to foreground ‘political and ideological priorities’ above everything else, a tendency that has been critiqued by the South African literary critic Chapman as ‘the paradox’ of postcolonialism (Chapman 2008: 67). By paradox, Chapman implies postcolonialism’s challenge to ‘Western totalising narratives’ and yet replaces those narratives with an uncritical deference to ‘a Northern institutional perspective’ where ‘theory predominates over practice’. In other words, because postcolonialism finds eminence through voices that are housed at institutions in the North, postcolonial theory risks ‘replicating the very position’ it seeks to undo. The consequence thereof is that postcolonialism, at least in the context of literature, as Chapman has argued, ends up fostering an ‘issue reading’ approach to literature, which unwisely ‘accent’ a Northern paradigm at the expense of the South.

Similarly, Helgesson, another literary critic, has described the same phenomenon identified by Chapman as the ‘ironical predicament of post-colonial writing’ (Helgesson 2004: 26; see also Zeleza 2003: 230–232; Olaniyan 2007: 637–639; Brown 2008: 80–81; Lopez 2001; Mbembe 2002: 143–178). The decision to note criticism or the ‘paradox’ of postcolonial theory, to use Chapman’s expression, however, as indicated, is not to burden this study with

postcolonial theory but is rather informed by a slightly different logic. Significantly, the decision stems from a view that holds that it should be the objectives of the study and its data that dictate which theoretical approach is suitable and not how much prominence a theory enjoys (Mouton 1996: 38–39). Accordingly, it is informed by the latter view, whereby Don Mattera in this study as a primary reference is not read through a postcolonial theoretical optic but through the lenses of black/Africana existential thought and philosophy. However, this does not entail a slavish loyalty to black/Africana existential philosophy either. Hence, the dissertation, on the basis of interpreting its data, posits an argument that questions rather than blindly endorses the epistemological premises of the latter philosophy.

The conventional premise of black/Africana existential philosophy as popularised by Leonard Harris, one of its early advocates, is that it is a *Philosophy Born of Struggle* (1984). Accordingly, in its discursive concerns, themes of freedom, liberation and struggle represent the preferred optic through which the black and African experience is interpreted. Thus, the privileged hermeneutic is unapologetically that of struggle. Nevertheless, without dismissing the logic of attaching significance to the historical experience of black and African suffering in the world, a deeper reading of the protagonist of this dissertation demands a questioning of the discursive limitations associated with valorising the hermeneutic of struggle as the only privileged optic to read and interpret black and African experience, sense of self and subjectivities. The study arrives at this critique through a careful reading of Mattera as a creative writer and activist and does so without erasing in the process his sense of being a Muslim. In particular, reference to ‘being Muslim’ and, by inference, ‘Islam’ in this study is not so much in the sense of Islam and Muslimness as cultural aberrations to African and black identities. Rather, Islam and being a Muslim are read as critical components of Mattera’s identity, sense of self and subjectivity.

To bring this chapter towards an end, there is a need also to comment on the methodology that has guided this study.

Research Methodology: A Case Study Design Approach

Merriam describes ‘qualitative researchers’ as researchers who ‘are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences’ (Merriam 2009: 5). This description provides a concise comment on the kind of methodology that is adopted in this dissertation. Since this is primarily a conceptual (and textual) study, the dissertation relies mainly on a qualitative research methodology. This choice of methodology is in line with the logic that has influenced the study’s analytical and theoretical approach. As indicated, it must be the study and the questions it raises that indicate which research methodology is most appropriate. Within the qualitative approach itself, however, this study has deployed what is defined as ‘the case study design’, the selection of which is not used here in any reckless way as a ‘catch-all category’ as Merriam has cautioned. Accordingly, taking such caution seriously, the case study design as used here is in the sense in which it implies ‘a bounded system’ that automatically sets the parameters and thereby helps to ‘delimit’ the subject being studied (Merriam 2009: 40).

Thus, a case study understood in the sense of a ‘bounded system’ is generally considered useful because of its focused nature, as it allows within the case study itself ‘multiple variables’ that, in turn, facilitate a far deeper understanding of the subject or ‘phenomenon’ being studied. Ironically, this advantage can also be a ‘weakness’ and one of the limitations of the case study approach (Merriam 2009: 51). In other words, owing to the emphasis placed on ‘a single unit of analysis’ (the case study), chances to generalise within the case study approach are great (2009: 52). To avoid the latter criticism, limitation and potential

weakness, this study has opted to give the primary case study a comparative twist, whereby Don Mattera as the primary ‘case study’ is read along with another case study. This is in the form of Malcolm X, who, though from a different context, nonetheless represents a contrasting figure on whom there is already an extensive body of work (known as ‘Malcolm X studies’) (see Marable 2012; Dyson 2004; Rashid 1993; Cone 1991). This additional case study, which constitutes one of the substantive chapters in this study, helps to guard against making unqualified generalisations and mitigates against some of the criticism regarding the case study design.

Accordingly, the data for this study is not only limited to Mattera and his literary works but also include Mattera’s public speeches and articles that he has written either as a political, cultural and social critic or as a journalist. These materials augment Mattera’s autobiography, *Memory is the Weapon*, which ends with the destruction of Sophiatown in the early 1960s. Moreover, his autobiography was not intended to cover his later years, in particular his Muslim phase. Thus, through literary and non-literary materials as data for this study, materials that are read intertextually comprise a kind of ‘longitudinal sampling’, to borrow a phrase from Manganyi (1981: 2), of what Mattera and his work represent – that is, a ‘longitudinal sampling’ of someone who is otherwise a complex individual, a public poet and a self-taught, self-made intellectual, and, more significantly, of a black African Muslim figure making sense of his sense of self and place in the world.

Following Silverman, the approach to data analysis adopted here was a bit unconventional. Instead of waiting until the end when all the data is collected, Silverman recommends that analysis of data must begin quite early in the research process. This does not entail a premature analysis of materials. Instead, continuous evaluation of available data helps not only to organise the study but also to deepen the insights through constant reflection on the

collected data (Silverman 2006: 2). In fact, Silverman's views are reinforced by Merriam (2009), who is more emphatic in insisting that 'data analysis should [...] be conducted along with [and not after] data collection' (Merriam 2009: 269). In particular, it was through this process of constant engagement with the data and research materials that I was able to observe a surprising pattern: themes began to emerge with relative ease. This has enabled the dissertation to be organised more systematically by following a thematic pattern. In addition, the emerging themes while collating the data demanded an interdisciplinary approach as an analytical method.

While aware of risks imposed by an interdisciplinary approach such as the potential to sacrifice the depth that comes with 'micro and uni-disciplinary approaches', the study has nevertheless embraced the opportunities and the risks that an interdisciplinary and, by inference, an open approach to knowledge involves (Best & Kellner 1991: 259), namely opportunities to improvise in search of alternative ways of knowledge production and ways that seek to move away from fossilised patterns of thought but which open up creative possibilities to make new knowledge possible.

Chapter Outline and Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation consists of seven chapters, and their brief outline is as follows:

Chapter One: This chapter serves as an introduction to the study; it provides a background on and context to the scope, focus and parameters of the study. In addition, it provides a motivation for the study's research methodology and its interdisciplinary bias as well as why Don Mattera is the central focus in this dissertation.

Chapter Two: As a background to the chapters that discuss the content of Mattera's work, Chapter Two serves as a biographical chapter. In particular, this chapter is biased towards sketching an intellectual biographical portrait of Don Mattera.

Chapter Three: This chapter maps and makes a case for the study's analytical approach and method. In addition, it elaborates in detail on what is implied by the idea of Africana/Islamica existential thought (and philosophy), which serves as the conceptual and analytical anchor for the dissertation.

Chapter Four: Through an intertextual reading, that is, reading Don Mattera through his work, this chapter begins the task of analysing in-depth some of Don Mattera's early works of poetry and his recent poetry that has not yet received any substantive treatment.

Chapter Five: To foreground the intertextual reading adopted in Chapter Four, this chapter complements the reading of Mattera through the lenses of his poetry alone and focuses mainly on his works of fiction. The focus here is primarily on his collection of short stories *The Storyteller*.

Chapter Six: The focus of this chapter is slightly different from Chapters Four and Five, which focused mainly on Mattera's creative work (namely his poetry and fiction). In particular, the shift gives critical attention to Islam and takes up some of the issues raised in Chapter Two. Hence, the chapter *situates* and *reads* Don Mattera alongside Malcolm X, who shares a similar life history with Don Mattera. The aim of this chapter is to interrogate and probe what is conceptualised in this study as an Africana/Islamica existential thought and philosophy.

Chapter Seven: This is the concluding chapter, which sums up, evaluates and gives a conclusive interpretation of the study as a whole.

CHAPTER TWO

DON MATTERA: AN INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHICAL

PORTRAIT²³

Not all intellectuals are confined to, nor even products of, the Universities. (Zeleva 2003: 66)

In its purer form, the intellectual stands outside the power structures of society and offers opinion in the name of high ethical or intellectual principles, and so is more concerned with the quest for 'truth' than with official truths of states. (Cowan 2003: 103)

Introduction: Why an Intellectual Portrait?

How and *where* does one begin to sketch a biographical portrait of Don Mattera that would paint a balanced portrayal of his achievements? In fact, Mattera posed this question when I first sought his consent to foreground him and his work in this research. At the time, Mattera probed: 'How would you capture and write my life of over seventy years? Which Don Mattera will you focus on and leave out?'²⁴

²³ Since there is to date no available comprehensive biography on Don Mattera, most of the biographical content in this chapter is drawn from a number of sources, which range from his autobiography *Memory is the Weapon*, various interviews in print, newspaper articles, résumés and personal interviews and conversations with Mattera. See also the brief entry 'Omaruddin Francisco Mattera' in Goolam Vahed's *Muslim Portraits: The Anti-Apartheid Struggle* (Durban: Madiba Publishers, 2012): 211–215; and, also my essay 'Complex Subjectivities: Don Omaruddin Mattera's Conversion to Islam, Beyond a Political Reading and a Biographical Essay.' *Journal for Islamic Studies*, 2014, 34 (1): 153–176.

²⁴ Personal research notes from a telephone conversation with Mattera, 27 December 2006.

While much is known and recorded about Mattera's early life, there is, however, little that is written or known about his intellectual achievements. Part of the problem with the neglect of Mattera's intellectual achievements has to do with how he is constantly framed as a 'former gangster'. For example, in a profile of Mattera that appeared in the *Weekly Mail* in the 1980s, he is represented with the dismissive description: 'the lyricist of the bloody knife'. Also, as recent as 2013, in an article that appeared in *Al-Qalam*, a Muslim national publication, to capture an event honouring him, the heading read as follows: 'From "gangster" to "humanist", Dr Don Muhammad Omaruddin Mattera honored' (*Al-Qalam* June 2013: 3). Now, to mention these facts is not to call for a valorised portrayal of Mattera's life but is to caution against a narrative that only reinforces his past involvement in gangsterism.

Much has happened in Mattera's world since he abandoned his delinquent ways as far back as the late 1950s. Hence, it is not surprising that the younger generation of writers, poets and artists recognise Mattera more for his intellectual achievements than for his former life. Among the latter generation, Mattera enjoys somewhat of an iconic status. Accordingly, the difficulty with sketching a balanced biographical profile of Don Mattera is that he is not only a writer, poet, activist and journalist but is also, in the words of a younger poet, Mphutlane Wa Bofelo, 'an institution'.²⁵ That being the case, this chapter is not intended as a comprehensive biographical account of Don Mattera's life but rather aims to sketch something akin to an intellectual biographical portrait: an aspect of his that is generally ignored or thinly covered in some of the few biographical résumés available on him. Even Mattera's own autobiography, *Memory is the Weapon*, despite giving glimpses of the formative intellectual influences on him,

²⁵ From personal research notes from a conversation with Bofelo, Durban, 13 July 2007.

does not venture to offer a comprehensive intellectual profile of his progression from a life of delinquency to an accomplished writer, journalist, poet and activist. In fact, *Memory is the Weapon* culminates with the ‘demolition’ of Sophiatown in 1962 (Mattera 2009 [1987]: 17; Davie 2005: 7) and is based on Mattera’s story of life in Sophiatown. It does not cover the intervening years or the later challenges and achievements in his life. As Mattera wrote: ‘many people have told the story of Sophiatown. But there remains that unwritten manuscript; the untold story of a boy fighting in the streets, a boy who was once secure in his dreams before the destruction came to his city, to his family and to himself [...]’ (Mattera 2009 [1987: 53]).

Clearly, there is a need to move beyond the narrative of Sophiatown and to account for Mattera’s life after Sophiatown. Accordingly, instead of touching on every minute detail of Mattera’s life, as a conventional biography would demand, this chapter traces only some of the critical signposts in what Mattera considers his ‘metamorphosis from veritable violent beast to human being’ (2009 [1987]: 128). Naturally, this metamorphosis should also include the other critical change in Mattera’s life, namely, his encounter with Islam which is placed in perspective and revisited in Chapter Six.

Unconventional and ‘Self-Taught’: The Making of a Writer and an Intellectual

For someone who is not a graduate of any formal university training, Mattera’s intellectual achievements are remarkable. His intellectual formation was not linear in the conventional sense of starting from pre-primary school and progressing up through primary, secondary and tertiary education. On the contrary, Mattera’s learning was punctuated by episodes where formal and informal learning collided. In addition, central to this learning was the cultural and socio-political milieu of the cosmopolitan Sophiatown, where Mattera grew up, and which shaped Mattera’s early consciousness. It is this kind of background that I would prefer to call

an experiential pedagogy and intellectual formation, which situates Mattera as a self-taught and self-made intellectual. In a sense, Mattera can be described along the lines expressed by the historian Tiembe Zeleza in his definition of African and black intellectuals: ‘Not all [African] intellectuals are confined to, nor even products of, the universities’ (Zeleza 2003: 66). Without a single formal degree, Don Mattera has risen to be an accomplished poet, journalist and writer of note. And in recognition of his work, he has received ‘many prestigious literary awards’ and ‘humanitarian citations’ as noted in some of his résumés. Three South African universities have awarded Mattera honorary doctorates in acknowledgement of his literary output and humanitarian work. These are the former University of Natal (1999), Wits University (2009) and UNISA (2011).

Major Works, Themes and Reception

Although his writing career was curbed by his long years of banishment between 1983 and 2012, Mattera has published about twelve works. These consist of an autobiography, five volumes of poetry, a collection of short stories, four plays and a children’s book. In each of these works, the existential dimensions of black existence are persistent. Equally significant are the universal themes that emerge when his work is read more holistically. Mattera’s autobiography *Memory is the Weapon* can be read together with similar works like Bloke Modisane’s *Blame Me on History* and Es’kia Mphahlele’s *Down Second Avenue*. These works represent part of the black autobiographical canon. With regard to Mattera’s autobiography, not only does it capture the social history of Sophiatown, but it also foregrounds black subjectivity during the most oppressive years of apartheid. The significance of Mattera’s autobiography is best captured in the Wits citation on occasion of his award of an honorary doctorate in literature. The citation reads that Mattera’s work represents ‘an important

landmark in the literary canon that has grown up around Sophiatown’ and proceeds to describe his literary achievements at length:

His emphasis on the political importance of memory in the face of totalitarian forgetting became an important point of reference and helped to shape the philosophical position of the black consciousness movement in South Africa, in which he became involved in the 1970s [and has] foreshadowed many of the debates on remembering that surrounded the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. (Wits graduation brochure, 14 April 2009)

In the main, Mattera’s work can be divided into two distinct phases: works that were penned during the apartheid years and those that were penned after the fall of legislated apartheid. Whether there are discernible shifts or continuities in his body of work is among the questions explored in the subsequent chapters. But who exactly is this self-made intellectual, accomplished writer, journalist and poet? What kind of educational training, if any, was Mattera exposed to in his formative years? Above all, what sort of books did he read that shaped his consciousness, intellectual tastes and ideas?

Birth, Early Pedagogy and the Gift of Poetry

Described in the supplement to the *Mail & Guardian* of 6–12 November 2015 as ‘one of the African continent’s pre-eminent poets’,²⁶ Don Mattera was born in 1935 in Western Native Township and present-day Westbury near Sophiatown on 29 December 1936. As he attests in his autobiography, he was named *Monnapula* (one who brings rain) at birth, and he considers his birth extremely special and that he was a gifted child. As he points out, rain (*pula*) in *Setswana* and ‘African folklore’ connotes, among other meanings, renewal, rebirth and abundant life. However, Mattera’s own sense of specialness stems from not only his name but

²⁶ See *Mail & Guardian* (supplement) 6–12 November 2015, p. 2.

also his mixed parentage. As he informs readers in his autobiography, he is a product of miscegenation: he had an Italian grandfather, a Xhosa grandmother, a half-Italian father and a Tswana mother with Khoisan heritage (Mattera 1987: 27–28). It is in the existential and later intellectual sense that Mattera can be regarded as a truly cosmopolitan figure and this underpins Appiah's swipe at those who insist on essentialist notions of African identity (Appiah 1992: 176 - 177). With regard to Mattera's literary development, it is discernible from some of his interviews that he became literate at a young age. As he notes: 'I could decipher words from the age of three, when I was about four I was already scribbling and writing my name, my address, writing names obviously with wrong spelling [...]. So when I was five I was already literate in some ways' (Mattera 2002: 153).

Besides the cosmopolitan environment of Sophiatown, it was also life at a Roman Catholic boarding convent in Durban where he was sent as a young boy aged six years that made an imprint on his formative years. Although Mattera refused to be baptised as a Catholic while at the convent, he mentions how he would read the Bible from page to page – not because of conviction in its message but for aesthetic purposes. 'The love of words' is something that has fascinated Mattera from childhood. As he insists in a rare interview in the poetry journal, *Timbila*, poetry came naturally to him, or, as he put it: 'I was born with the gift of poetry' (2002: 154). Thus, he tells the story of how, for example, he wrote his first poem or 'recitation' when he was only 'about eight and a half' years old. The poem reads as follows:

To the veld
I would like to wander
There
Where sunset's a golden splendor
Where honeybees hum sweet scalodes
And the white veld flowers
Scent the morning breeze
Oh how my heart
There, longs to roam
To that white, open world

That is my home
To hear birds sing
Of dewdrops that shine
And to know that life
Can be sweet and divine. (Mattera 2002: 154)

Although Mattera claims, in a self-deprecating fashion, that the above piece was only ‘a recitation’, Nghaluma notes that for an eight-and-half-year-old Mattera was ‘definitely a genius’ (2002: 154). Besides formal classes, Mattera contends that during his school years he was an avid reader and read ‘all sorts [of] books.’ These ranged from Shakespearean works such as *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* to works of science fiction such as those by H.G. Wells (Mattera quoted in *Timbila* 2002). Mattera maintains that books by Wells, in particular, helped not only to sharpen his writings skills but also stimulated his creative imagination, especially when he began to experiment with short stories. One such story that he wrote during this young age was ‘about pumpkins that swallowed people up’. To his surprise, the story won him a prize. Still describing his love of books, Mattera claims he would spend time in libraries and recalls how his schoolmates would tease him by naming the school library ‘Don Terror’s Library’. The nickname ‘Terror’ was due to his fighting antics with older boys (Mattera quoted in *Timbila* 2002: 155). As part of his ‘voracious’ reading, Mattera delved into ‘reading good books’ outside of fiction, especially ‘American revolutionary works’ such as those by ‘Paul Robeson, Richard Wright and WEB du Bios’ (quoted in the Madi Gray interview; see also Vahed 2013: 211).

By all accounts a brilliant youngster, Mattera had the fortune of being promoted to higher grades within the space of ‘three’ or, at other times, ‘six months’ within a year (Madi Gray interview). Another trait of his that is often ignored is his oratory skills that were honed during his school years. From the age of ten, he spoke of being ‘the chief debater’ representing his school. Paradoxically, while leading the Vultures as a gang leader, Mattera simultaneously

partook in activities for the Western Areas Student Association (WASA). Also, he managed to finish his Matric in 1957 (Avarez-Pereyre 1980: 1). In the interview with Madi Gray, he claims that WASA was really a front or ‘a conduit to recruit for the ANC youth league’. As Mattera explains:

Learned white and black people lectured us on various aspects of life. Dr Ray Philips spoke on social work. Dr Xuma, formerly leader of the African National Congress spoke on health and education and the roles we as youth would be called upon to play. Joe Slovo and a man called Goldberg also addressed our meetings at the home of our WASA colleague Lekoto. (Mattera 2009: 133)

Delinquency: From Catholic Convent to the ‘Twilight Zone’

According to Mattera, his stay at the Catholic Convent boarding school was terminated owing to a decree that the school should only be open to orphans. Since Mattera was not an orphan, this shortened his stay at the Catholic Convent. By 1949, Mattera was back with his family in Sophiatown, where he continued with his education at the local Krause Street High School. Killian describes this time as an alienating moment for the young Mattera. According to Killian, as well as Mattera’s account, the death of his grandmother in 1946 meant that ‘the Mattera family [had] lost their anchor’ (Killian 1994: 12). It was during this time that Mattera was drawn into the world of ‘gangsterism’. While Mattera owns up to this part of his early life, he nevertheless contests the blanket condemnation that such youth were terrorising people. For him, any youth faced with the conditions that confronted his generation without any supportive environment would be prone to ‘delinquency’ and the life of gangs. This is how Mattera recounts his entry into the world of gangs: ‘it was not long before I was involved in many fights, so that street-fighting became second nature to me’. Owing to his boxing prowess, a skill acquired at the Convent, and sheer ‘guts’, Mattera soon won ‘a following’ and hence

became a leader of the Vultures, one of Sophiatown's 'most dreaded gangs' (Mattera 2009 [1987]: 47).

Henry Nxumalo's 'The Birth of the Tsotsi' (or gangster), an article that appeared in the *Drum* magazine in the early 1950s, endorses Mattera's view on gang culture among the youth at the time:

Of course, tsotsis are made as well as born: they are made everyday on the Reef. It is true that when a young boy takes the wrong turning it is partly his own fault; but the amount of crime in a city varies with the well-being or poverty of the mass of its citizens. With the grinding poverty and the sea of squalor that surrounds the 'Golden City'; it is not difficult to understand the rest. Here is a struggle for existence, and the individual intends to survive. (Nxumalo, in *Drum* 1951)

On the surface, it might appear that Nxumalo is providing a veiled justification for the scourge of gangsterism. On a closer reading, however, it is evident that his article was based on the true story of a certain 'young Sibani' an 'illegitimate' child with 'no education, no work, or no pass'. The only way he could survive was to be 'a tsotsi' in the streets of Johannesburg. In the case of the Vultures, the gang that Don Mattera would eventually lead, was launched to 'protect' other boys from big bullies. From this protective circle, it soon developed into a fully-fledged gang with Mattera as its leader. Much of this is written about in *Memory is the Weapon* and is recounted in Mattera's extensive interview with Tom Lodge (2002).

Mattera's escapades and involvement in gangsterism do warrant a detailed and nuanced analysis. According to Magubane, inasmuch as Mattera accepts his life in gangsterism, it is 'not because he takes morbid delight' in his former life as a gangster. Rather, there is a suggestion in Magubane's capturing of Mattera's narrative that illustrates that 'once the oppressed' are conscientised, they 'can be transformed into constructive political action' (Magubane 2009 [1987]: xix). This was certainly the case with Mattera, which accounts for his political transformation from delinquency to politics. In fact, in both Mattera's autobiography

and his extensive interview with Tom Lodge, Mattera talks at length about the notion of a ‘gangster politician’. In other words, Mattera saw no contradiction in his involvement in gangs while still, from time to time took part in activities for the WASA student debate society. The line between ‘gangsterism’ and politics was thus blurred.

‘Metamorphosis’ and a Heightened Political Consciousness

‘Metamorphosis’ in the subheading above is taken from Mattera’s words in describing his transition from delinquent street life to a meaningful existence as an activist and writer. This is how Mattera captured this moment of change:

The streets no longer appealed to me and some members of my outfit began to question my leadership, especially when I suggested that we disband the Vultures, who had been in the battlefields of Sophiatown since the middle of 1951. I felt a deep unwillingness to fight again, because the streets seemed to have lost their magic, the magnetic force that had drawn me to violence. (Mattera 2009 [1987]: 127)

Besides Mattera’s narrative for his turn away from ‘the magnetic force’ of the streets, accounts of his abandonment of delinquency assert it was the demolition of Sophiatown that heightened his political consciousness (Magubane 2009 [1987]: ix – xxiv). For Mattera, the destruction of Sophiatown served as the catalyst for planting ‘the first seeds of political awareness’ and thus his ‘introduction into [a] new world.’ This political metamorphosis introduced Mattera to a world ‘where men and women spoke their minds’, and it would eventually see him gravitating more ‘to youth clubs, libraries and education centres’ (Mattera 2009 [1987]: 128). Politically, this implied that Mattera could no longer remain indifferent to the political climate around him. His new political consciousness prompted him, in the words of Magubane, to ‘put down the knife and gun’ and replace it with ‘the pen’ (Magubane 2009 [1987]: x).

In the midst of the political campaigns of the time, ‘two individuals’ had a serious ‘impact on Mattera’s life’: Father Trevor Huddleston, an Anglican priest known for his anti-

apartheid stance, and Nana Sita, a great admirer of Mahatma Gandhi and a member of the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC).²⁷ Huddleston's impact on the young Mattera is evident in Chapter Nine of Mattera's autobiography, which is simply titled 'Father Trevor Huddleston'. On this man of the cloth, Mattera writes: 'Father Huddleston was an integral and an important figure in the life and history of Sophiatown and the country as a whole. His active and selfless role stands as a monument of human concern' (Mattera 2009 [1987]: 91).

Mattera also writes admirably of Nana Sita: 'Few men in this world continue to live beyond their graves; Nana Sita was one of them. He had transformed despair into hope; fear into understanding; cowardice into courage' (Mattera quoted in Magubane's 'Introduction' to *Memory is the Weapon* 2009 [1987]: xi). Elsewhere in his autobiography, Mattera continues to pour more tributes on Nana Sita and remarks:

[...] a simple and deeply religious Indian stand-owner, the now dead Nana Sita was repeatedly jailed for refusing to move from his home of many generations. Sita an indomitable believer in passive resistance, had been a close friend of Gandhi during his years in the Transvaal. His refusal to obey unjust laws and to fight ungodly laws was rooted in the teachings of Gandhi, and his determination inspired and encouraged thousands of others. (Mattera 2009 [1987]: 11)

Mattera's admiration for both Huddleston and, more especially, Sita reflects an openness and a propensity to be swayed by external influences outside his racial and cultural belonging. Inasmuch as Mattera was an outspoken voice of Black Consciousness and pan-Africanist ideals, his admiration for both Huddleston and Sita are visible. Besides political influences, Mattera was also undergoing some deep introspection. The birth of his first child and how he

²⁷ More details on Nana Sita can be gleaned from South African History online. Available: www.sahistory.org/people/nana-sita. [2015, July 25].

had survived death many times impressed on him that there was more to life than gangs and violence (Vahed 2012: 211). Therefore, it was a combination of the heightened political climax of the era and personal introspection that eventually pulled Mattera away from the streets and gang violence.

It can be argued that since the politics of resistance at the time were dominated by the African National Congress (ANC), the latter was Mattera's first political home. Later, he would gravitate towards the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), which had broken away from the ANC and would serve as its underground operative until it was unbanned. For his affinity to the PAC, which was perceived at the time as being more radical than the ANC, Mattera credits the influence of his elder brother, the now late Edward Sonnyboy Bhengu. Bhengu was considered a 'stalwart' of the PAC, and Mattera was clearly impressed by his brother's involvement in the struggle. Shortly after Bhengu's death, Mattera described his brother as 'an uncompromising political activist' who had 'joined the late founder-president of the PAC Robert Sobukwe in the founding of the organisation in 1959'. Mattera in a tribute went on to describe his brother as someone who was 'respected and admired by veterans of the liberation movement both at home and abroad' (*Sowetan*, 31 December 2010: 17).

With the banning of the liberation movements in the 1960s and the imprisonment of prominent resistance leaders like Nelson Mandela of the ANC and Robert Sobukwe of the PAC, Mattera's political commitments were not subdued. While writings on the Black Consciousness Movement tend to focus mainly on the role played by Steve Biko,²⁸ the

²⁸ See, for instance, works on Biko, the edited collection of essays by Andile Mngxitana, Amanda Alexander and Nigel C. Gibson, *Biko Lives! Contesting the legacies of Steve Biko* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008); Xolela Mangcu, *Steve Biko: A Biography* (Cape Town: Struik); and Tendayi Sithole's *Steve Biko: Decolonial Meditations of Black Consciousness* (New York: Lexington Books,

popularisation of the Black Consciousness Movement was largely facilitated by writers like Don Mattera who used not only their poetry but also their journalism to advance the ideals of Black Consciousness. To say that Mattera was central in the institutions that propped up the Black Consciousness Movement is not to exaggerate. Not only is he the ‘founder of the Union of Black journalists’ (UBJ), Mattera was also central in the formation of ‘the Congress of South African Writers’ popularly known as COSAW in 1986 (Magubane 2009 [1987]: x). That Mattera’s anthology of poetry is invariably referred to as the hymn or bible of Black Consciousness, and Mattera himself referred to as a ‘bard of liberation’ all bears testimony to his pivotal role in liberation politics and, more specifically, the Black Consciousness Movement.

Literary Censorship, Banning Orders and House Arrest: 1975–1983

Although Saleem Badat does not refer to Don Mattera in person, his *The Forgotten People* (2012) provides a useful indicator of how South African censorship laws and political banishments were far worse than ‘physical imprisonment’. For a banned person, coupled with censorship, as was the case with Don Mattera, banishment constituted a form of psychological torture. From 1975 to 1983, Mattera was given a banning order. This meant that he could neither publish his writing nor attend any public gatherings. This is what has prompted Killian to argue that the banning order had a debilitating effect on Mattera’s writing career. While it did not succeed in crushing Mattera’s spirits, his creative writing suffered a serious setback. For almost a decade, Mattera was banned and ‘placed under house arrest’. Besides Don

2016); and the recently published Mabogo Percy More’s, *Biko: Philosophy, Identity and Liberation* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2017).

Mattera's political activism, *where* and *how* does he fit in within South Africa's black and African intellectual history?

From Sophiatown Renaissance to Post-1976 Cultural Icon: Mattera as an 'Intellectual Bridge'

Ntongela Masilela, a South African literary historian, has provided a useful insight into Mattera's place in South African intellectual history. After noting Mattera's 'displacement' in South African literary history, and, more specifically, in the Sophiatown renaissance, Masilela has situated Mattera as 'the intellectual bridge' between the Sophiatown intellectual renaissance of the 1940s and 1950s with the Soweto or 'Staffrider literary generation' of most young activists in the 1970s (Masilela 2009).²⁹ This was at a time when the Sophiatown generation was either disappearing or coming 'to a terminus' owing to the political upheavals and repressive political environment that culminated in the Sharpeville massacre in 1960. It is against the latter background that Masilela maintains that Mattera 'formed the intellectual bridge' with the emerging 'Staffrider literary generation of the 1970s' when the likes of Can Themba, Lewis Nkosi, Es'kia Mphahlele and Mongane Serote had virtually 'disappeared' owing to either exile or death (Masilela 2009). It is worth capturing Ntongela Masilela in full when he situates Mattera and his intellectual achievements within a pantheon of other black

²⁹ For the idea of Mattera as an 'intellectual bridge' between the Sophiatown generation and the Soweto generation, I am indebted to Masilela's entry on Mattera in his New African Movements Website. See Ntongela Masilela's 'Don Mattera – Sophiatown Renaissance (1952 – 1960)'. Available: <http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/NAM/sophia/writers/mattera/matteraS.htm>. [2009, November 27].

South African intellectuals that stretch back all the way to the late nineteenth century. Masilela states:

The achievements of Don Mattera are exemplary and will endure. His cultural, political, and intellectual activities in the present form a historical arch with other achievements of New African Intellectuals within New African Movements across the South African modernist movements experience in the twentieth century: the poetry of Mattera should be appreciated in relation to the poetry of Isaac Wauchope in the late nineteenth century as well as that of Peter Abrahams in the late 1930s; his editorial stewardship of *Sowetan* [...] in the 1990s should be compared to R.V. Selepe Thema's guidance of the *Bantu* [sic] *World* newspaper in the 1930s; [and] his assistance in the founding of the *Union of Black Journalists* in the late Twentieth-century should be seen as continuity with the organization of African journalists founded by Solomon T. Plaatje [...] and F.Z.X Peregrino (editor of *South African Spectator*) in 1903. (Masilela 2009)³⁰

I agree with Masilela's perceptive depiction of Mattera as the 'intellectual bridge' between Sophiatown and the Staffrider or later 'Soweto generation'. This endorsement is also affirmed by the Wits citation referred to earlier, which asserts that 'There can be no doubt that Mattera shaped the thinking of many young people in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s who were socialized in the 'struggle' on a diet of his provocative literature' (from Wits graduation brochure 2009: 11). Although the aforementioned assertion is correct, Mattera's influence has stretched far beyond the 1980s and into the present. For example, as recent as 2002, two young artists, the female poet Ntsiki Mazwai and hip-hop artist Max-Hoba, teamed up to collaborate on a poetic/musical production based on a rendition of Mattera's anthology of poems *Azanian Love Song*. In addition, another young and famous poet (and occasional TV presenter) Lebo Mashile further confirmed Mattera's influence. In Mashile's words, Don Mattera is considered 'a

³⁰ See Masilela's 'Don Mattera – Sophiatown Renaissance (1952 – 1960)'.

Available: <http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/NAM/sophia/writers/mattera/matteraS.htm>. [2009, November 27].

superstar and celebrity’ within their ‘sub-culture and community of hip-hop and young poets’ (Mashile 8 August 2011).³¹

A neglected and yet critical dimension of Mattera’s quest for meaningful existence and intellectual growth, is his views on religion. Whilst the significance of Islam in his life, is discussed later in Chapter Six, an account of Mattera’s taken on religion, that would eventually lead him to embrace Islam, is necessary.

Becoming a Muslim: Mattera’s Enthralment with Islam’s notion of Compassion

In one of the rare interviews where Mattera comments on different aspects of his life, as well as his views on religion, he openly affirms his ‘love of religion’. In this interview he mentions that although he was exposed early in his life to Christianity, especially Catholic ways imbibed at the Dominican Catholic convent (p.55), he did not become a Christian. However, in his journey to educate himself, he conceded, he has always been fascinated by religion and has studied ‘a whole lot of religions’ (Mattera interviewed by Nghaluma 2002). Mattera’s reference to his study of a ‘lot of religions’, is underpinned by a subtle disclaimer on his stance regarding institutional religion as opposed to what he describes as the ‘highest form of religion’. This highest form of religion, he qualifies as ‘the religion of compassion’ (Mattera interview with Nghaluma 2002: 162 - 163). In the interview with Nghaluma, he remarks further that for him, religion is not an end in itself, but ‘a stepping stone’ towards where ‘I want to be’. This distinction is critical if an appreciation of Mattera’s ideas on the meaning and place of religion in his life, is to be appreciated.

³¹ See also Edward Tsumele’s ‘Mattera Rediscovered.’ In *Sowetan* 2008.

Although critical of institutional religion, Mattera has not totally rejected formal religion. In his search for the highest form of religion he gravitated to Islam in 1976. He credits the *Tabligh Jamaat* – a pietistic religious movement dedicated to intra-Muslim spiritual reform, for the *hidaya* or spiritual guidance to eventually become a Muslim. This is how Mattera in a predominantly Muslim gathering in 2004, recalled the defining moment of his spiritual turn to Islam: ‘Had the *Tablighis* not come to Johannesburg in 1976, this man would not have taken the *kalima* (Muslim testimony of faith).’

While the aim in this section is not to offer any detailed analysis of Mattera’s encounter with Islam, it is critical to note that unlike with most black/African conversions to Islam during this time that were influenced by political considerations like the blanket rejection of missionary Christianity as the tool of black oppression, or the image of Islam as a political force or *jihad* against oppression (Moosa 1995:152; Esack 1997), Mattera’s attraction to Islam had less to do with politics. In addition to the pietistic message of the *Tablighis*, Mattera contends his other attraction to Islam was due to the Islamic articulation of the notion of compassion (Mattera quoted in Vahed 2012: 214). Accordingly, even though Mattera was known for his political activism, his turn to Islam was driven by ‘a deeper quest’ for a meaningful spiritual life beyond political reasons (Sitoto: 169 – 173).³² Thus for Mattera the religious self is a self that is the embodiment of compassion. And, I agree with Vahed’s brief observation on Mattera in *Muslim Portraits: the anti-apartheid struggle*, that his ‘actions are motivated by compassion’ (2012: 214). Enthralment with compassion is not limited to

³² For a detailed discussion of Mattera’s conversion and encounter with Islam, see my essay, ‘Complex Subjectivities’: Don Omaruddin Mattera’s Conversion to Islam, Beyond a Political and Reading an a Biographical Essay. *Journal for Islamic Studies*, 34: 153 -176.

Mattera's sense of self and religious sensibility, but also, finds expression in his creative writings as illustrated later in the analysis of his poetry and fiction (in this study).

Vocation as a Journalist

Funny thing, journalism [...]. It is totally dependent on the ideas of others and if journalists flatter themselves that what they produce is the first draft of history; they should remember that the first draft of anything usually gets 'spiked'. (Graham-Yooll 1995: xi)

This biographical portrait would be incomplete if it were to omit Mattera's vocation as a journalist. In addition to his creative writing, literary work and activism, Don Mattera also worked as a journalist for a number of prominent newspapers. These have ranged from newspapers in the 'mainstream'³³ press, such as *The Sunday Times*, *The Star*, *The Weekly Mail* (now *Mail & Guardian*), *The Sowetan* and *Finance Week*, and community-based publications such as *Roots* (Mattera 2008: v–vi; see also Wits graduation brochure April 2009: 10). Given the imperative to provide a full portrait of Mattera's intellectual profile, a section that locates Mattera within the context of his vocation as a journalist is therefore not misplaced. However,

³³ 'Mainstream' in South African usage, as opposed to 'alternative' or 'community-based press', generally refers to newspapers owned by the big press conglomerates and media houses in South Africa. However, in the context of the post-apartheid period, these designations have become outdated. The white monopoly of the big media houses has, in some instances, entered partnerships with black financial groups with an interest to have a stake in the media, such as the current ownership of the *Mail & Guardian* by the Zimbabwean tycoon Trevor Ncube. For more details, see David Wigston's 'A South African Media Map.' In *Media Studies*. Edited by Pieter J. Fourie. Lansdowne: Juta, 2007, p. 52. See also Keyan Tomaselli's 'Ambiguities in Alternative Discourse: *New Nation* and *Sowetan* in the 1980s.' In *South Africa's Resistance Press: Alternative Voices in the Last Generation Under Apartheid*. Edited by Les Switzer and Mohamed Adhikari. Ohio: Ohio University, 2000, pp. 373–403.

as Andrew Graham-Yooll reminds readers in his memoirs, journalism by and in itself remains ‘meaningless’ (1995: 1). To find meaning, journalism must be viewed in the context of a community of readers. The journalist, as it were, does not operate in isolation but is ‘totally dependent on the ideas of others’ (1995: xi). In other words, it is from the community of readers, society and interest groups that a journalist’s sense of location in the world can better be appreciated. However, one must not be fooled by Yooll’s self-deprecating statement on journalism.

A critical reflection on black and African intellectual history in South Africa suggests a peculiar, if not a symbiotic, relationship between journalism and the country’s prominent black intellectuals, writers and authors. This is not to say that all black authors, writers and intellectuals were journalists. However, if the few available studies are anything to go by, it is true to say that a significant number of them have at one point or another in their careers doubled up as journalists. Mcebisi Ndletyana’s edited *African Intellectuals in 19th and 20th Century* underscores this assertion (2010). Out of the six intellectuals profiled in this book, the biographical sketches of two, namely John Tengo Jabavu and Reverend Walter Rubusana, have specific sections illustrating their careers as journalists (see pp. 33–39 and 48–49). Also, in Colin Bundy’s concise biography on Govan Mbeki, the late leader of the ANC, there is a chapter on Mbeki senior as ‘Journalist and author’ and covers the period ‘1955–1963’ (Bundy 2012: 103). Likewise, in a study on Alex La Guma’s fiction, Jabulani Mkhize devotes critical attention to the journalistic role of black intellectuals in South Africa (Mkhize 1998). In the case of Mkhize’s case study, for instance, his focus is partly on how journalism might have influenced the form and content of La Guma’s fiction. This view leads Mkhize to assert that in La Guma’s fiction there is an unmistakable ‘carry-over’ of the journalistic style into his creative works, hence Mkhize’s conclusion that La Guma’s fiction is based on ‘social realism’ (1998: 67).

To arrive at a comprehensive picture of Mattera's intellectual achievement, to borrow Masilela's phrase, demands some reflection on his vocation as a journalist. For example, what kind of journalist was Mattera? And what is the content and philosophy that informs his journalism? Was Mattera, for instance, the archetypal journalist whose sole task is merely to 'collect and edit news' for purposes of distribution to the reading audience? Alternatively, as a journalist, did he, in presenting the news, also seek to distil and 'interpret' information in line with his own perception of reality? That is, did he see the news as a way to generate ideas and thoughts, and not just as a reflection of the pulse of society? Did he turn the news into an alternative view of *how* an ideal world should be as opposed to *what* it is? In short, how do we make sense of Mattera's praxis as a journalist?³⁴

Rhetoric and Practice of a Journalist: When Art and Journalism Collide

This section seeks to situate not only Mattera's journalistic vocation, but also seeks to make sense of the extent to which the tension between Mattera the journalist and Mattera the poet collides. In this regard, Walter Benjamin's notion of the author as 'the producer' of ideas and thought is quite useful. Also, relevant are Vernon Robbins' insights on how rhetoric in his extensive usage is not just confined to how 'language in a text is used as a means of communication' only. Rather in Robbins' extensive usage 'the rhetorical' connotes how language provides an opportunity to analyse and 'give special attention to the subjects and

³⁴ It might be useful in future scholarship on Don Mattera to devote an entire investigation to his style as a journalist and to perform an extensive content analysis of either his columns or his writings in his capacity as a journalist. However, I have deliberately kept away from such an undertaking in order to avoid diverging from the focus and thrust of this study.

topics a text uses to present thought, speech, stories and arguments' in addition to meanings associated with a given text (Robbins 1996: 1). Language is not only deployed as a means of banal communication but also used 'to create a view' of a better universe. Accordingly, to refer to the rhetoric of a journalist, the intention is not merely to locate Don Mattera within the context and history of the pantheon of African and black intellectuals that came before him, but to address the question of what kind of journalism Mattera advanced. That is, should he be categorised as a conventional journalist at all?

Inarguably, to make sense of Mattera's journalistic practice, it must be seen within the broader context of apartheid South Africa and the history of his time as a journalist from the 1970s to the early 1990s. David Wigston has described the period of the '1960s to the late 1970s' as a time marked by the rising tide of the Black Consciousness Movement (Wigston 2007: 53). Accordingly, given Mattera's prominent role within the Black Consciousness Movement, it makes sense to view his career as a journalist within the context of his activist role and thus as being directly involved in the political mobilisation of the time. In its multi-pronged strategy, the Black Consciousness Movement also prioritised encroaching on the media with a view to 'penetrate the white-controlled, commercial black press' with a dose of Black Consciousness ideas (Mzamane & Howarth 2000: 186).

Linked to the imperative 'to penetrate' mainstream media was also the need to organise black journalists. Mattera was playing a key role as one of the founders of the Union of Black Journalists (UBJ). The latter became the black counterpoint to what Phelan has termed the 'white journalism guild', meaning the South African Society of Journalists or SASJ (1987: 67). Without delving into an elaborate history of black journalism and resistance press in South Africa, the roots of Mattera's journalism are undoubtedly located within such a history. Although the role of Black Consciousness activists and poets is mentioned in passing in current

literature that deals with ‘alternative’ or ‘resistance press’, journalists like Don Mattera and his contemporaries such as Wally Serote, Sipho Sephamla, and James Matthews have indeed played a prominent role. This assertion finds support in Mzamane and Howarth’s essay ‘Representing Blackness: Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement’ (Mzamane and Howarth 2000: 208), as it does in Les Switzer (2000).³⁵ The problem, however, is that such writing is generic and does not, as mentioned earlier, give attention to the distinctive role of the individual black journalist.

Likewise, Michael Chapman’s essay at the end of his edited anthology comprising a selected array of stories by black writers in *The Drum Decade: Stories from the 1950s*, though useful, has analysed these writers only against the role played by the *Drum* magazine as a vehicle that promoted ‘Black South African writing’. In other words, the focus is not invested on individual journalists but on *Drum* as the avenue that provided ‘the substantial beginning, in South Africa, of the modern black short story’ as captured in the columns of the magazine (Chapman 2001: 183).

Clearly, Chapman is less interested in the black journalist than in the development of ‘the modern black short story’ (Chapman 2001: 183). The caveat here is that the literature on black journalism does not foreground the role of the individual black journalist. Rather, it is premised on discussions of ‘advocacy journalism’ or on a media that promoted ‘pro-government views’ and apartheid propaganda (Chapman 2001: 186). From such a preoccupation, the narrative of this literature proceeds to argue that the politically conscious black and African journalist, or journalists in general, advance a form of advocacy journalism. As Colin Bundy, with particular reference to Govan Mbeki, has argued, advocacy journalism

³⁵ See also, Elaine Potter’s, *The Press as Opposition: The Role of South African Newspapers* (New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975).

was accordingly driven by a desire to ‘use the printed word’ as a platform ‘for political education’ (2012: 87).

Advocacy or Radical Journalism?

The notion of ‘advocacy journalism’ is conceptually limiting for situating a journalist like Don Mattera. Preferably, a term that should be used to describe the kind of journalism that Mattera advanced is that of black radical journalism. This signals a shift in the kind of journalism that Mattera’s generation had begun to embark upon. Their journalism was steeped in the politics of resistance and radical confrontation rather than only advocacy and protest against the apartheid status quo. Inarguably, the problem with the notion of ‘advocacy journalism’ is that it offers a mild or moderate approach of black journalist in the era of Tengo Jabavu and Walter Rubusana, even up to Govan Mbeki’s era. In other words, the latter represented a kind of journalism that was caught between the ‘new [African] middle class’, or what Mark Gevisser has termed ‘New Africans’, that served ‘as a buffer between colonial society and the rest of the [rural] indigenous population’ (Gevisser 2007: 31–45).

While the notion of black radical journalism is inspired in part by Cedric J. Robinson’s *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (2000 [1983]), the notion is used here as a means to accentuate the politics advanced by the Black Consciousness Movement and the role that Mattera played in its formative years through his journalism. Here, I agree with Les Switzer. In particular, Switzer has drawn a distinction between ‘protest’ that marks the earlier periods and the ‘resistance’ phase in South African alternative journalism, and has characterised the role of journalists aligned to Black Consciousness, like Mattera, as representing a more radical shift. In other words, the latter breed of journalist was more

forthright in their condemnation of the political status quo (Switzer 2000: 1–75; see also Limb 2000: 79–127).³⁶

The distinction is crucial and worth citing, because working as a journalist within the political turmoil of the 1970s meant operating during a period when state repression and banning orders were the order of the day. As already noted, Mattera was not spared from such banning orders. Yet he did not succumb to the ban but operated as a radical journalist. In a sense, therefore, it could be argued that it is in the context of the radical journalist in the tradition of black radicalism as espoused by the Black Consciousness Movement that Mattera's role as a journalist should be viewed. However, this description as an end in itself is inadequate. While Mattera's political role as a defiant journalist and an organiser of Black consciousness is correct, it is not conclusive.

'Rhythm of Words' in Print: Mattera's Journalistic Style

To frame Mattera's work mainly as a political journalist using words as weapons to fight the status quo would be misleading. In addition to radical journalism, Mattera's approach to journalism and his unique style can be described as artistic or 'narrative journalism', that is, a form of journalism that is beyond simple facts and which relishes in the form and prose in which facts are narrated. Put differently, the words must be vibrant and alive and must not lose the reader's attention. Thus, the 'rhythm of words' is as important as the story or event that the

³⁶ An elaborate discussion and coverage of resistance press is offered in Les Switzer's 'Introduction: South Africa's Resistance Press in Perspective.' See Les Switzer and Mohamed Adhikari's *South Africa's Resistance Press: Alternative Voices in the Last Generation under Apartheid*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000.

journalist is covering. Within the context of the latter approach, Mattera played a critical role not only in his capacity as the arts editor for the *Weekly Mail* but also in his role as senior trainer of, and hence mentor to, those yet to be initiated into the art of journalism. Beyond his political role, Mattera's vocation as a journalist was also pedagogical. Elsewhere, Alvarez-Pereyre, in reference to Mattera as a poet, has singled out Mattera from his contemporaries and argued that Mattera was 'also a teacher' (Alvarez-Pereyre 1984: 35).

While Alvarez-Pereyre is referring to the didactical component of Mattera's poetry, it is contended here that as a journalist, in addition to his political commitments, Mattera's teaching and mentoring impulse took the form of his role as a creative and innovative mentor. This assertion finds support in a number of tributes that Mattera's protégés have shared about him across the colour line. Indeed, Mattera was a father figure in the *Weekly Mail*'s training project for young and aspiring journalists, and his creative approach to journalism is attested to by many of those who were either trained or coached by him, such as Jennifer Tenant of the *Weekly Mail* or Rashid Chopdat, who was 'mentored by Don Mattera' while working for the *Star*.³⁷

In *25 Years of the Mail & Guardian* (2010), Jennifer Tenant offers a rare glimpse of Mattera's creative and unconventional approach to journalism. Tenant retells an incident where Mattera invited a group 'of Reggae musicians' as a means to impress on the young trainees the significance of good prose and the need to have words dance on paper to capture the reading audience. This is how Tenant recalls the event:

There was the project's father figure, Don Mattera [...] head of the training project, who shared his poetry and stories, gave advice and support, and imparted his passion for

³⁷ From conversations with Rashid Chopdat, 18 May 2013, Johannesburg; and 29 September 2012, Durban.

language. One of the most remarkable workshops was a session run by Don. At his invitation a remarkable group of reggae musicians arrived one morning to demonstrate the underlying rhythms of words. (Tenant 2010: 124; see also Goldstuck 2010: 122)

There are numerous such testimonies that echo Tenant's recollections of her time working with Mattera for the *Weekly Mail*, such as one by Tebogo Alexander, who at the time was a trainee reporter. Echoing Tenant's sentiments, Tebogo Alexander had the following to say:

Swaziland may have been the clay I was made of, but there were crafters, moulding hands including those in the M&G news room of the early 1992 – the late great Raeford Daniel, Don Mattera, and, younger and still evergreen, Shuan de Waal [...]. This was the newsroom of kick-ass journalists [...] scribes who mastered this art long before 'narrative' journalism became a buzzword [...]. No disrespect to journalism schools, but I wouldn't have swapped those few years as a trainee and then junior journalist for any other training. (Alexander 2010: 83)

Indeed, there is broad consensus on Mattera's 'passion for language', which, in Tebogo Alexander's view, nurtured 'scribes' who excelled in the 'art' of journalism 'long before "narrative" journalism became the buzzword' (2010:83). One could surmise that if there was no space in the formal academies for Mattera's talent, journalism provided him with an avenue to express his passion for the magic of language. And Mattera's leadership of young cadets has shown that as a journalist Mattera was also a teacher who sought to influence the practice by locating the journalist as an artist in the newsroom. In other words, the artist and the journalist co-exist in Mattera, enabling the poet to take his art and passion for language into the world of print media. The effect of this was to promote within journalistic culture the view that, besides factual reporting, the words must also have a rhythm on paper (Tenant 2010: 122). In this sense, Mattera was more of a poet than he was a conventional journalist, and gave eminence to the rhythm of words on paper to make facts alive.

In addition to the imperative of taking intelligent prose and artistic sophistication to the print media, Mattera the activist also looms large. As a journalist, Mattera's career was also driven by the imperative to change what Walter Benjamin has called the 'technologies of publication' by infusing them with a new consciousness that brings life to the printed word

(Benjamin 1969: 26). This tension between the activist and the journalist is something that also saddles Mattera's career as a creative writer. While noting this tension, it is not so much a question of whether Mattera the journalist contradicts the poet or whether the two are dialectically opposed. Rather, the poet and the journalist, or the 'writer and poet', are, as Walter Benjamin has argued, involved in the process of literary production. Thus, the news media or 'press' accords one of the multiple avenues that facilitates artistic literary expression.

Inasmuch as Mattera has played a leading role in South African journalism as both an activist and a practicing journalist in his capacity as an editor, the journalist or the writer must also seek to change the 'technologies of production' where the journalist becomes 'a producer' of life-affirming conditions (Benjamin 1969: 227). From the latter perspective, Mattera's role cannot be flawed. As a radical journalist, his existential situation of being black, forcefully classified as the perpetual 'other', does not escape from but lives with him. Hence, his activist role and the imperative to organise black journalists saw Mattera become the founding figure of the UBJ. While this political activism looms large, it does not do justice to Mattera's career as a journalist, wherein he was not content to use the journalistic space as merely an armchair critic. On the contrary, Mattera sought to change the 'process of production'. In short, the untenable conditions and system under which the writer operates had to be overhauled. In other words, the author or journalist is not merely a propagandist but also a figure that must call into question the very conditions of his or her 'own existence'. It is in this existential sense that Mattera, as an activist journalist, must also question the 'existence of the class that owns' the press and literary avenues of expression or the 'technology of publication' (Benjamin 1969: 229). Translated to the world of Mattera the journalist, this understanding is embodied in his praxis as a journalist.

This political interpretation would be amiss if it failed to account for the persistence of the artist, author and ‘teacher’ that coheres in Mattera. The activist does not sacrifice sound journalistic taste and appreciation for complex prose. If anything, the *Weekly Mail* observed this quality in Mattera and hence found him to be an ideal candidate for the role of lead trainer and ‘father figure’ in its training project for young journalists. In addition, he was also assigned given the position of its arts editor. It is then through his writing as an arts editor and a columnist that Mattera the cultural critic takes centre stage. It is thus critical to note here that Mattera’s journalistic practice, even though still under the aegis of ‘alternative press’ does not take place within the context of ‘tabloid journalism’ (see Wasserman 2010). The use of ‘tabloid’ here is not in its pejorative sense of ‘trashy’, ‘sensational’ and careless journalism but as a means to designate the fact that Mattera operated within the context of mainstream journalism, albeit one committed to an alternative press in South Africa, and, was considered credible.

While Mattera’s political commitments are expressed in his writing as a journalist, his love of language was not sacrificed at the altar of journalism. It is precisely for this reason that in his capacity as a chief trainer for the *Weekly Mail*’s cadet programme for young journalists that he would insist on creative approaches to reporting. He insisted that ‘words must dance on paper’. When one uses journalism as ‘a cultural weapon’, good writing must not be a casualty, because it is through this quality of writing that the ‘everyday life experiences’ of the people and their yearning for a better society might be captured. And if the journalist is not to lose readers, then dry and dead language must be avoided. In this instance, Mattera’s calling as a poet has proven handy. And, as such, there is no conflict between Mattera the poet and Mattera the journalist: the two are complementary.

Concluding Remarks

One of the challenges regarding black and African intellectual history in South Africa is that it is often skewed. It is an intellectual history told in the context of black African intellectuals and their relationship with the early Christian mission history whose subtext is to provide a benign narrative on early Christian-led schools as incubators for the emergent black and African elite (Ndletyana 2010: 5; Mokoena 2011; Mangcu 2012: 33 – 39). Don Mattera's intellectual portrait represents a different picture. What emerges from a critical assessment of Mattera's life of self-transformation, transcending his delinquent past as a gang leader, is the life of a self-taught individual, activist, poet and journalist of note. Given his love of books and 'voracious' reading – a reading discipline that was undoubtedly instilled in part at the Roman Catholic convent where Mattera spent his formative years. However, the convent, cannot take all the credit. Mattera returned from the Convent when he was still 14 years in 1950. To his disappointment, he found his family falling apart. The family matriarch and Mattera's grandmother who until then had kept the Mattera clan together had passed away. This had an adverse effect on Mattera. Pulled by 'the cruel, fascinating world of Sophiatown' he turned to the streets for most of his teenage years (Mattera 2009: 47). Hence, those that have commented on Mattera's life during this time like Es'kia Mphahlele, have concluded, that 'writing was certainly not an obvious' choice for him (Mphahlele 2007: vi). Such a conclusion, fails to appreciate that Mattera, by his admission, was 'a different gangster' as attested by Tom Lodge (2002).

Inspired by figures like father Huddleston and Nana Sita, Mattera was increasingly drawn into political activism, abandoned the streets and turned to writing and journalism. Accordingly, to accent Mattera's career as a journalist towards the latter part of this Chapter

was not arbitrary. Notwithstanding his many roles, it is as a writer and journalist that Mattera has demonstrated his intellectual genius. Banned and silenced for almost a decade between 1975 and 1986 – a period that had a debilitating effect on Mattera’s writing career. Nevertheless, he managed to stamp his authority on the local literary scene. While his contemporaries like Can Themba, Lewis Nkosi, Es’kia Mphahlele and Mongane Serote, chose exile, Mattera remained in South Africa. Unfortunately, the exclusive focus and pre-occupation with Biko in the writing on black intellectual history has meant that the intellectual contributions and profile of figures like Don Mattera and their intellectual insights, remain unnoticed. However, as shown here, Mattera rightly qualifies as the intellectual bridge between the Sophiatown intellectual renaissance and the Soweto insurgent and radical generation of the 1970s. Immortalised through plays and song, Mattera’s writings have continued to inspire the younger generation of black writers and poets.

This chapter has sought to illustrate that as a writer, journalist, poet, and political and cultural activist, Mattera is a man of many talents, a mostly self-taught intellectual and writer who triumphed against all odds. Since religion is critical in Mattera’s sense of self, his biographical portrait could not ignore the religious dimension in his life. Hence the chapter has referred to Mattera’s sense of religiosity, and, his eventual transition to Islam. This was done without analysing the full meaning of his sense of being a Muslim which receives more attention in Chapter Six.

As for the chapter’s bias towards sketching something akin to an intellectual biographical portrait of Mattera’s achievements, the bias is deliberate. It serves as a necessary backdrop to the subsequent chapters where attention is given to Mattera’s literary work and the content of his thought and praxis. This is in line with the critical questions pursued in this study.

CHAPTER THREE

ON AFRICANA/ISLAMICA EXISTENTIAL THOUGHT (AND PHILOSOPHY) AS A CONCEPTUAL APPROACH AND METHOD

Africana existential philosophy is a branch of Africana philosophy and black philosophies of existence. (Gordon 2000: 5)

To designate a field of philosophy as ‘African’ is consistent with [...] naming philosophical traditions and practices according to their cultural, ethnic, national or merely geographic origins [...]. But this imitative definition [...] fails to capture [...] contradictions – which animate African philosophy [as a] discipline. (Eze 1997: 1–2)

Africana Studies in its evolution over three decades or more should have developed many evaluative lenses of phenomenon, as well as mental plans of ways to understand African people and their many experiences. (Aldridge 2007: xii)

Introduction

One of the challenges to this study centred on the question of method and what theoretical approach would be adequate to offer a comprehensive reading and interpretation of Don Mattera. The study has then gravitated toward Africana existential thought and philosophy as its theoretical method and conceptual anchor. The purpose of this chapter is to clarify as well as provide the context and sense in which terms like ‘Africana’, ‘Islamica’ and ‘black/Africana existential philosophy’ are utilised. That is, as a means to put into perspective the method, theory and conceptual approach used in this study.

First, the term *Africana* is used in this study in the sense that Appiah and Gates have used the term in the voluminous *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African-American Experience* (1999).³⁸ The latter work, as its editors' claim, was initially inspired by the doyen of the early generation of African American intellectuals, W.E.B. Du Bois. Hence, when the 'Encyclopedia Africana' was finally published, it was hailed as the fulfilment of Du Bois' 'dream' (Appiah and Gates 1999: ix–xvi; Gates 2003).³⁹ In the context of this study, for a self-reflexive account on the term Africana beyond its descriptive usage, I am indebted to Don Mattera himself. Although using the term Africana in a minimalist sense to describe books catalogued under such a label, Mattera's questioning attitude alerts against a simplistic usage of 'Africana' as merely a descriptor of things African. In an article that appeared in *The Star* newspaper, 'The snake of apartheid may shed its skin', and, commenting on what it *means* to be a banned writer under apartheid rule, Mattera remarked: 'If some of their books could be unbanned then South Africa could have its treasure of Africana from the Black perspective.' Africana is underlined to underscore Mattera's usage.

³⁸ Another usage of Africana that first gripped me was in the work of Ali Mazrui, 'Pax-Africana.' For a detailed critique of the latter work, see Darryl C. Thomas, 'From Pax Africana to Global Africa.' In Omari H. Kokole (ed.), *The Global African: A Portrait of Ali A. Mazrui* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1998), p. 79.

³⁹ For an account on the challenges and how the Encyclopedia was finally published, see Henry Louis Gates Jr., 'The Encyclopedia Africana,' *Social Dynamics*, 29.1(2003): 131- 144. Available: <http://dx.doi.org/1080/02533950308628653> [2017, October 7].

As for the term *Islamica*, although borrowed from *Periodica Islamica* – a periodical index on the latest works on Islam – it is used in a variety of contexts. Ebrahim Moosa, refers to ‘Pax Islamica’, where the term is simply used as a reference to the entire Muslim empire beyond the Arab world (Moosa 2005: 7). In the context of this study, taken together, *Africana* and *Islamica* are mobilised as discursive constructs. Accordingly, the formulation Africana/Islamica in the double and combined sense in which it is captured fully in the title and heading of this chapter underpins the quest to find a useful discursive bridge to foreground the dialectic and interface that happens when categories that are generally understood as ‘Islamic’ and ‘African’ are treated together. That is, rather than perceiving them as constituting an oxymoron, they are treated as a compatible theoretical concern.

Although Emmanuel Eze in the second epigraph of this chapter is not referring to Islam per se, his remarks, when considered in their full context, are instructive. Engaging with debates on what constitutes the nature and content of African philosophy as a ‘professional discipline’, Emmanuel Eze has emphasised the need to take critical note of ‘discursive productions’ and ‘cultural complexities’ that should inform African philosophy. To be comprehensive, African philosophy must find ‘evaluative lenses of phenomenon’ and ‘mental plans’ that would encapsulate ‘African people and their many [diverse] experiences’ (Aldridge 2007: xii).

Eze and Aldridge’s comments provide a good starting point to give context to the formulation Africana/Islamica existential thought as an analytical and conceptual construct for this dissertation. However, notwithstanding the reference to Africana existential philosophy and thought, the study has noted a glaring gap in the latter field. Africana existential thought and philosophy is generally silent on Islam as an aspect of black and African cultural worlds,

which thus remains the least explored dimension of African and black existence. Gordon's edited anthology *Existence in Black*, for example, except for the occasional reference to Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan, out of its 21 chapters, does not have a single essay or chapter devoted to a critical reflection on Islam within the black experience.⁴⁰ Admittedly, this study is not the first to make this observation. As noted in Chapter One, African philosophers like Bachir Diagne have bemoaned the failure of African philosophy to treat Islam seriously within its discursive concerns.⁴¹ In addition, Edward Blyden and later contemporary champions like Ali Mazrui and Sulayman Nyang have pleaded a case for Islam as a signature of African identity or as part of its 'triple heritage'. But they do not adequately probe Islam as a critical discursive and analytical category through a deeper interrogation of the meaning of black and African Muslim identity.

Another convention worthy of comment in the use of critical terms in this study is that I have, as a means to circumvent the distinction between 'Black' and 'Africana', conflated both

⁴⁰ Jacoby Adeshei has made a similar observation in his review of Gordon's critical text *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (2008). Referring to Gordon's discussion of Africana philosophy as 'starting more or less around the sixteenth-century', Adeshei has observed that 'there is a noticeable absence of discussion of [...] figures' from 'African Muslim populations' whose works could be considered philosophical works falling within the period to which Gordon referred. See Jacoby Adeshei's review of Lewis Gordon's *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 275pp, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 2008.11. 07.

⁴¹ See Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *Islam in Africa: Examining the notion of an African identity within the Islamic World*. In *A Companion to African Philosophy*. K. Wiredu, Ed. London (London: Blackwell Publishing), pp. 374- 383.

terms with a slash, as in black/Africana existential thought and philosophy. This is done in full awareness of the slight distinction between the aforementioned terms. The category Black or Blackness, for instance, according to Gordon covers ‘a broader terrain’ than Africana does (2000: 6). However, the rationale for conflating or using Black and Africana interchangeably here is based on the logic that even though both terms have nuanced differences, I agree with Gordon, ‘the question of blackness’ recurs constantly in Africana thought and hence makes the distinction between black and Africana negligible (Gordon 1997: 3).⁴² However, to situate the usage of Africana as a term and concept beyond a descriptive level does require additional comment.

Certainly, it would be a gross mistake to romanticise a term like Africana as though it were unproblematic. As is common of names and labels, the term Africana is certainly a controversial term. In the past, Africana has connoted different meanings and possessed different definitions. From a purely linguistic position, the dictionary meaning by *Webster’s Ninth Collegiate Dictionary* describes the term ‘Africana’ as referring to ‘materials’ such as ‘books’, ‘documents’ or ‘artefacts’ that have to do with ‘African history and culture’ (1984: 62). Moreover, it is in the context of the latter usage that the colonial archive used *Africana* to refer to materials depicting the African world and her diaspora. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that what was often classified as ‘Africana’ in the colonial and, more specifically, in the apartheid era (such as in southern Africa) left much to be desired. In other words, inasmuch as the term has become rehabilitated and thus given dignity as a credible descriptor of matters

⁴² For a thick historical and discursive account on Blackness as a critical category, see the latest work by Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Johannesburg: WITS University Press, 2017).

related to Africa and, more specifically, as an academic area of enquiry, the term is nevertheless saddled with a contested history or ‘roots in a racist past’ (Zulu 2012: 3; Okafor 2014: 217). A point in case is an advert from a website⁴³ of one South African bookstore. The advert reads as follows: ‘Africana Books: Rare and uncommon [...] we offer antiquarian books on South Africa, published from two hundred years ago until the present [and] on a number of subjects.’

Curiously, what the aforementioned advert implied by ‘a number of subjects’ ranged from books dealing with such mundane topics as ‘Africa travel’, ‘Exploration’, ‘Art’ and even ‘Africa fishing’. Nevertheless, the advert also had an entry that read ‘Africana biography’. Browsing further under books listed within the biography section, it was clear that the term Africana was used rather indiscriminately. Under the caption of ‘Africana biography’, for instance, there were many contradictions. Biographies of African icons were listed together with those of past colonial and apartheid icons. For example, an entry on the Nigerian activist Ken Saro-Wiwa (who was executed by Soni Abacha), *In the Shadow of a Saint* (2000), shared space with entries that ranged from biographies on Cecil John Rhodes and Jan Smuts to Sheila Bevan’s *The Parting Years: A British Family and the End of Empire* (2001).

In referring to the aforementioned bookstore and website, the purpose is to make a simple point; that is, the term Africana undoubtedly lends itself to different usages, and in the context of the ‘Africana bookshop’ advert, the insertion of Africana was a catchphrase to advertise a wide range of books irrespective of their content. In other words, it did not matter that some of the books advertised were ‘un-African’ in their tone and content. What mattered

⁴³ This website is just one of many other websites that purport to be associated with things described as Africana. Available: <http://www.Africanabooks.Devilspeak>. [2012, April 21].

was that the books in question happened to be written somewhere in Africa and southern Africa. This factor alone was the sole qualification to label the advertised books as ‘Africana books’, notwithstanding the fact that books so described advanced some of the old colonial stereotypes about Africa and her people. Beyond the uncritical deployment of the term, Africana as an intentional intellectual and academic term, has a rich, albeit contested history.

Africana Thought (and Studies) More Than a Label: Genesis of an Academic Field

Historically speaking, the coming of age on the use of Africana in the strictly academic sense is linked directly to the politics of knowledge making, especially within the US academy. Such politics were grounded in struggles initially for a more inclusive curriculum or ‘equal access to the curriculum’ (Bates, Mudimbe & O’Barr 1993: xi – xii; Okafor 2014: 210 – 211). To be exact, the genesis of Africana Studies as a label of choice for a field of study, is credited to a group of ‘dedicated African-American professors’, initially at Cornell University. It was the collective efforts of these black academics that ensured that the term Africana Studies as a designation for a distinct academic area gained recognition (Asante 2007: 98–99; see also Aldridge & James 2007). Molefi Asante has argued that the designation Africana Studies was then used as a substitute for its precursor, which had the overtly political designation ‘Black Studies’ – a designation that was the catalyst to kick-start a movement of critical black scholarship within the US academy. Hence, Asante has credited what he prefers to call ‘the Black studies revolution’⁴⁴ for the birth of Africana Studies. As Asante notes: ‘Riding on the

⁴⁴ See Maulana Karenga’s *Introduction to Black Studies* (Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 1982), Cedric Robinson’s thick historical volume on *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983), and, to some extent, Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University

tide created by Black Studies, the Africana Studies Movement was carried to new shores in the Academy in the early 1980s.’ Africana Studies for Asante ‘was not a different species than Black Studies; it was in fact a new name [...]’ (2007: 98). The switch to Africana, Asante has argued, was intended ‘to make the field more academic and less political’ (Asante 2007: 98).

It would be a mistake to take Asante’s comments at face value. Taken in their proper context, and given Asante’s location as one of the leading exponents of the Afrocentric School, his take on Africana as a designation for an academic field is ideologically loaded. This is evident in Asante’s insistence that the term Africana was simply ‘intended to de-politicize the study of African phenomenon’ and thus, unlike Black Studies, it signalled ‘a step away from confrontation’ (Asante 2007: 99). However, is Asante’s assertion not premised on trivialising what the embrace of the term Africana Studies entailed? That it, was not only a question of name change but also an implied epistemological shift from Black Studies? Inarguably, to appreciate the shift towards embracing the term Africana Studies over, say, Black Studies – or, for that matter, Afrocentricity – is to acknowledge that inasmuch as the Black Studies Movement had pioneered Black radical thought (within the academy), like all intellectual movements and traditions, Black Studies had its limitations. Hence, some Black scholars intentionally embraced Africana in place of Black Studies as the preferred term.

Asante is correct in one sense when he affirms the political commitment of Black Studies, such as grounding its research agenda to pay close attention to questions pertinent to the Black condition. But it is precisely due to this overt political commitment that Black Studies has earned the reputation of being too provincial and limited in its scope and focus. Hence,

Press, 1993); together with other numerous works whose titles foreground ‘Black’, these works are, in a sense, are emblematic of the influence of the Black Studies movement.

Lucius Outlaw has characterised the narrow focus in Black Studies as ‘a partisan venture’ or ‘agenda’ (Outlaw 1996: 113). While different interpretations are given to the perceived ‘partisan’ nature of Black Studies, I interpret such a partisan stance to imply Black Studies’ intellectual quest that has attended mainly to the black diasporan context. When it came to dealing with continental black African experience, Black Studies’ theoretical limitations have fostered what Ali Mazrui, using Said’s notion of ‘Orientalism’ (1979), has termed ‘Black Orientalism’. Effectively, what Mazrui was saying, in his critique of Black Studies, especially in regard to its engagement with continental Africa, is that the ‘Black American paradigm’ was as guilty and insensitive to African realities as its Eurocentric counterpart.⁴⁵

The critique of some of the theoretical limitations of the Black Studies approach though is not limited to views expressed by continental African scholars, such as Mazrui. Black

⁴⁵ Mazrui’s critique is epitomised in his response to Henry Louis Gates’s TV documentary *Wonders of the African World* (1999). Referring to Gates’s documentary, Mazrui asked the vexed question: ‘Are we witnessing the birth of a new Black paradigm which combines cultural condescension with paternalistic possessiveness and ulterior selectivity?’ (Mazrui quoted in Zeleza 2003: 325–366); see Tiyaambe Zeleza, *Rethinking Africa’s Globalization* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2003), pp. 325 – 366; see also, Ali Mazrui, Black Orientalism: Further Reflections on Wonders of the African World. *West Africa Review*, 1(2), 1979. Available: <http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?101,1,2>. [2016, August 13] and Zine Magubane, Mazrui as Debator: Passion, Power and Polemics in Africanist Scholarship. In *The Mazruiana Collection Revisited: Ali Mazrui Debating the African Condition – An Annotated and Select Thematic Bibliography, 1962 – 2000*. A Bemath, Comp. (New Delhi: New Dawn Press, 2005), pp. 338 – 353.

Studies' propensity to claim exclusive monopoly to a privileged understanding of black life and experience has also received sharp critiques from other African American scholars within the US such as Michael Dyson. Although not dismissive of the contributions made by Black studies, and, noting the tendency to 'invade' Black studies as a credible field after its initial dismissal, Dyson is critical of the assumption that being black and presumably closer to the black experience gives one a 'special status' and insight. Dyson's critique is captured in this statement:

There is no special status of being that derives from Black cultural or historical experience that grants black interpreters an automatically superior understanding of Black cultural meanings [...]. In sum, black cultural and historical experiences do not produce ideas that are incapable of interpretation when the most critically judicious and culturally sensitive methods of intellectual inquiry are applied. (2004: 280)

In addition to what Mazrui and Dyson has critiqued about Black Studies in its North American context, Gordon has objected to Black Studies 'fictional construction' of African American representations of black people's experience as an exclusively 'black Baptist' and Christian community. As a result, such a narrow focus has presented a skewed construction of black identities that has erased other black experiences, such as those of the 'Black Muslim community' and what Gordon regards as 'large numbers of Black Jewish communities' within North America (Gordon 2003: 170). At its best, the narrative of exclusion of other black experiences is reflected in the treatment of Islam by the other offshoot of Black Studies, the Afrocentric School or, more appropriately, radical Afrocentricity.⁴⁶ The latter, according to

⁴⁶ To avoid sweeping generalisations, it is crucial to distinguish here that not every scholar who embraces Afrocentricity is anti-Islam; hence, a distinction is made here by using 'radical' Afrocentrists. For such caution, I am indebted to insights by the late South African Tsehloane Keto, who, although an outspoken Afrocentric, accepts the need to 'recognize' the 'validity, legitimacy and even the necessity of other paradigms'. See C. Tsehloane Keto's *Vision, Identity and Time: The Afrocentric Paradigm and*

Wesley Muhammad, continues to ‘launch’ what he terms a ‘crusade’ of ‘anti-Islam ideology’.

It is worth citing Wesley Muhammad in his concluding remarks from the article ‘Islam and the Afrocentric Crusades: The End of an Era’:

The myths that are the foundation of the Afro-centric anti-Islam ideology can now be proven to be myths. As a result, the days of Afrocentrists intellectually man-handling black Muslims or ‘Islam’ must end. I have demonstrated [...] that Islam is our ‘other Stolen Legacy’, and for supposed Afrocentrists to crusade against ALL forms of Islam, rather than against that Aryanized [...] form exposes them as being no true Afrocentrists at all. (Wesley Muhammad 2011)

It would be a mistake to dismiss Wesley Muhammad’s critique as coming from someone picking up a fight with the radical Afrocentrists. Sherman Jackson, one of the more prominent scholars on African American Islam, has also criticised the Afrocentric stance that tends to erase black American Muslim experience as if it were illegitimate and thus not part of the black community. Like Mazrui, Jackson in his critique of the Afrocentric attitude towards Islam invokes the notion of ‘Black Orientalism’. In fact, Chapter 3 of his book *Islam and the Blackamerican* (2005: 99–129), which Jackson describes as representing ‘the ideological encounter between Islam and Blackamerican’, is titled ‘Black Orientalism’ and discusses the latter phenomenon in great detail. In particular, for Jackson, ‘Black Orientalism’ is manifested in three typologies, namely: the ‘Nationalist, the Academic, and the Religious’. What is common in these expressions of Black orientalism is, according to Jackson, their participation in their ‘general aim of impugning the relationship between Blackamericans and historical Islam’ (2005: 108). Jackson’s work proceeds and then presents Islam as an integral component

the Study of the Past (Dubuque: Kendal/Hunt Publishing Company, 1995), p. 17. A few prominent black Muslim scholars openly subscribe to the Afrocentric School. For example, Conteen has identified the scholar and psychologist Na’im Akbar as one of the ‘primary proponents of Afrocentric scholarship’. See Cecil Conteen Gray’s *Afrocentric Thought and Praxis: An Intellectual History* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2001), pp. 12, 79 and 169.

of Black religious history, thought and experience and not as some added appendage to Black religion and history.

My purpose to refer to Black Studies and radical Afrocentricity is not to caricature these theoretical orientations. The aim is to show that the embrace of the term Africana – contrary to the argument advanced by Asante, whom Jackson in his typology of ‘Black Orientalism’ has classified as representing the black Nationalist variety (Jackson 2005: 108) – was not just a matter of a name change. Rather, the adoption of Africana also implied an epistemological shift from both Black Studies in its crude form and Afrocentricity’s theoretical orientation.

What needs to be emphasised here is that the tendency to conflate Africana Studies with its precursor black Studies or its contemporary counterpart Afrocentricity, or even with the historically older field of African studies, ignores some of the subtle yet nuanced differences between these intellectual traditions. The use of these labels or designations uncritically and interchangeably by scholars working in the field has also not been helpful. Thus, with reference to Africana Studies, the indiscriminate application of the term has led to great confusion as to what the designation ‘Africana Studies’ really implies. This confusion is evident in two anthologies published in 2005 and 2007. The 2005 anthology, edited by James L. Conyers Jr, uses the label *Afrocentric Traditions*, yet it is nevertheless described in its title page as ‘Africana Studies volume 1’. Accordingly, it is discernible from a critical reading of some of the chapters in the work that the authors in their respective chapters use ‘Africana’ or ‘Afrocentric’ interchangeably. Hence a close reading from, say, chapters invoking ‘Afrocentric’ with those employing ‘Africana’, besides the difference in the choice of nomenclature, the discursive similarities are remarkably similar. For example, if one compares Anthony J. Lemelle Jr’s ‘Africana Studies and the Crisis of Black Masculinity’ (Chapter 5) and James L. Conyers’ ‘Africana Studies and Black Popular Hip-Hop Culture: A Reflexive

Summary of Social and Cultural Movements’ (Chapter 9) with, say, Kobi K.K. Kambon and Reginald Rackley’s ‘The Cultural Misorientation Construct and the Cultural Misorientation Scale: An Africentric Measure of European Cultural Misidentification among Africans in America’ (Chapter 2), the theoretical thrust is similar. By a similar theoretical thrust, I am referring to the imperative to foreground what is either termed a ‘black’, ‘African’ or ‘Afrocentric’ perspectives in the aforementioned studies where emphasis is placed on giving agency to the African experience and people worldwide.

Likewise, in the 2007 anthology, published two years later and edited by Delores Aldridge and Lincoln James, *Africana Studies: Philosophical Perspectives and Theoretical Paradigms*, the range of contributors varies from authors as diverse as Molefi Asante, who, as noted before, self-consciously works within the Afrocentric paradigm, to Lansiné Kaba, who is traditionally located within the more conventional ‘African Studies’⁴⁷ field. Indeed, a brief résumé from the publication describes Kaba, for example, as receiver in 1975 of ‘the Herskovits Award for outstanding work in African Studies’ (Kaba 2007: 58). The reference to the two volumes (*Afrocentric Traditions* and *Africana Studies*) is to draw attention to the fact that both works discuss what is defined as ‘Afrocentric’ or ‘Africana’ as though the two intellectual orientations were identical when they are not. To say this is not to deny some of the overlapping theoretical and intellectual concerns that the two orientations share. Nevertheless, this acknowledgement of similarities should not lead to a failure to distinguish

⁴⁷ For detailed and self-critical reflection on ‘African studies’, I have relied mainly on Robert H. Bates, V.Y. Mudimbe and Jean O’Barr’s, *Africa and the Disciplines: The Contributions of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and Humanities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). See also, Bayo Oyeade, ‘African Studies and the Afrocentric Paradigm: A Critique,’ *Journal of Black Studies*, 22 (2), December 1990, 233 – 238.

that there are still intellectual undercurrents (and epistemological shifts) that mark some of the sharp differences between these intellectual approaches. There is the critical question, as pointed out in the second volume by Aldridge, of ‘whether Africana studies’ connotes more than just ‘a discipline in the traditional sense’. Or, does it imply ‘an area of inquiry’, where scholars would then use ‘tools from selected disciplines and apply them to a particular subject matter’ that is identified as Black or African (Aldridge 2007: x)? As useful as the two anthologies are as reference texts that catalogue and hence assess ‘the evolution’ of the field, both volumes have shied away from a more direct conversation with the kind of question posed by Aldridge. The criticism, therefore, posed by Afro-centrists such, as Asante on the ambivalence of Africana Studies requires some engagement.

‘Africology’ and the Afrocentric Critique of Africana Thought and Studies

Africana studies’ perceived sense of ambiguity has led Afrocentrists like Molefi Asante, to dismiss the designation ‘Africana’ as merely a neutral term with a limited purpose. Rather, Afrocentrists like Asante, Mazama (2009), Zulu (2012) and Okafor (2014) among others, prefer the term ‘Africology.’ They argue the latter term captures adequately the need for a well-defined field with a distinct method and theory of knowledge. Asante maintains, ‘in Africology, we have a definite connection between what we do and who we are as scholars’ who are devoted to the study of the African and black experience (Asante 2009: 14). Mazama, another leading Afrocentric scholar, qualifies her support for Asante as follows: ‘Afrocentricity presents itself [...] as the meta-paradigm of a field that should be appropriately named Africology’. Mazama qualifies and gives an additional definition to Africology as a ‘unidisciplinary’ venture ‘by virtue of being informed by a unique set of metaphysical assumptions’ (2009:75).

Asante and Mazama's pronouncement are given additional weight by Itibari Zulu in the article, 'Africana Studies: Post Black Studies Vagrancy in Academe.' Marked by its dismissive tone on 'Africana' in favour of 'Africology' as the 'appropriate name for a discipline that examines the story of people of African origin [...]', Zulu endorses the radical Afrocentric stance (2012: 6). What is common among these scholars is the convergence on Afro-centricity and Africology as a project that announces a disconnection with existing disciplines and fields. This position find impetus in the late South African Keto in his *Vision, Identity and Time: The Afrocentric Paradigm and the Study of History* (1995). In particular, Keto calls to task African scholars whom he has criticised for succumbing to what he regards as the dominance of the 'Eurocentric' or 'Europe-centred intellectual enterprise'. If anything, Keto's view rearticulates the conventional Afrocentric stand. In other words, one has to articulate his/her theory from a clearly defined 'location' and 'consciousness' (Asante 1999; Asante 2007a: 16; 2007b: 207–208; Mazama 2009; Keto 1995).

Nevertheless, if the above-discussed position represents some of the salient assumptions on which Afrocentricity is based as 'the meta-paradigm' for Africology, then how different is what is termed Africana thought and studies from Afrocentricity? After all, do the two not share the same theoretical questions and concerns? If so, is the asserted distinction then between the two not a fictional one? Why do some black and African scholars still find it difficult to embrace Afrocentricity and its theoretical positions, especially when such positions, at least on the surface, seem identical to questions also advanced by exponents of Africana thought and studies?

Africana Existential Thought/Philosophy an Epistemological Shift from Afrocentricity

While it appears on the surface that the theoretical questions raised by the Afrocentric School are identical to Africana existential philosophy's concerns, the theoretical resemblances in the articulated questions should not mask the differences. To underpin this assertion, reference shall be made to Lucius Outlaw, Tiyanbe Zeleza and, of course, Lewis Gordon. The reference to these three scholars is to demonstrate the intellectual currency in the usage and designation of Africana thought as a gesture that connotes an epistemic shift and, therefore, a critical yet creative distance from the Afrocentric stance. Furthermore, to conflate the two would be irresponsible and intellectually unmindful of the nuanced differences that the two intellectual orientations hold.

In an essay titled 'African, African American, Africana Philosophy', which appeared as a third chapter in *African Philosophy: An Anthology* (1998), Lucius Outlaw presents a persuasive critique of Asante's Africology and Afrocentricity. Outlaw takes issue with what he interprets as an unmistakably 'foundationalist' stance from the latter that rather essentialises how knowledge about Africa and Africans and their 'dispersions' should be constructed (1998: 33; see also Outlaw 1996: 115–134). While affirming Asante's contribution to what Outlaw regards as the advancement 'of democratically informed Intellectual spaces', that is, with the view 'to accommodate [...] a plurality of knowledge formations' (1998; emphasis added), Lucius Outlaw nevertheless questions Afrocentricity's rather 'totalizing' intellectual 'attitude'.

The problem, as Outlaw has argued, is that a fixation on 'reclaiming' and a rehabilitation of a foundational 'African' or 'forms of Africanness or Africanity' is problematic. It fails to account for the 'discontinuities' that have occurred as a result not only of 'spatial and temporal disruptions' but that are also due to 'historical, geographical, cultural

and sociological dispersions’ of African people throughout history. As a counter discourse, Outlaw proposes, with particular reference to the study of black/African American and even African philosophy, the designation ‘Africana Philosophy’ as ‘a gathering notion’ that can ‘situate the articulations [...] and traditions [...] of African and peoples of descent collectively’ to find ‘a tradition-defining, tradition-organizing – reconstructive efforts which are regarded as philosophy’ (Outlaw 1998: 39- 40). However, having recognised the need for a discursive philosophical tradition that would be ‘tradition-organizing’ in the sense of a philosophical tradition that is attentive to all the experiences of Africans and African descendants in their various dispersed contexts, Outlaw registers a discursive distance and, by inference, an epistemological shift from Afrocentricity’s foundationalist approach to ‘knowledge formation’. Africana philosophy in the sense invoked by Outlaw is not deployed as ‘a proxy for an immutable essence shared by all African peoples’ (1998: 39).⁴⁸ Rather, the latter is conceived as offering an alternative discursive or ‘heuristic’ term. It is in this critical sense of a ‘heuristic device’ that the designation Africana philosophy opens up more possibilities and ways of studying and dealing with the black and African experience in a non-foundationalist way.

Outlaw’s critique of Afrocentricity finds support in the eminent African historian Paul Tiyambe Zeleza. Zeleza points out inasmuch as Afrocentricity positions itself as an antithesis

⁴⁸ Outlaw’s views also find support in Bates, Mudimbe and O’Barr’s ‘Introduction’ in *Africa and the Disciplines: The Contributions of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and Humanities*, where they also offer a subtle critique of Afrocentricity. In particular, they assert that there is more to theoretical arguments and questions than simply geographic and historical similarities in terms of origins: ‘arguments are not privileged by their origins, geographic or cultural; arguments become knowledge when they have been refined by logic and sound method’ (1993: xii).

to the much-touted ‘Eurocentrism’, as the corrective of the latter, ‘*it is also* conducted on *the same* Eurocentric grounds’ (Zezeza 2003: 284; emphasis added). In other words, for Zezeza, Afrocentricity’s oppositional discourse, even though it prioritises African and black theoretical concerns, degenerates to a counterproductive discourse ‘of negative difference’. Put differently, rather than advance the quest for ‘epistemological and political liberation’ that its protagonists seek to achieve, it frustrates such a goal by reproducing an oppositional paradigm that loses relevance ‘outside Eurocentrism’. Accordingly, Zezeza concludes that as ‘passionate’ and critical as the ‘struggles’ waged by the Afrocentrists are, they are unfortunately misdirected (2003: 284).

To highlight the different critiques directed at Afrocentricity, the aim is to show that the selection of Africana existential thought as a theoretical orientation is not arbitrary. Rather, the decision signifies an intentional epistemological shift from the limitations of the early versions of Black Studies, such as its narrow focus on the African American context or, as illustrated with reference to Outlaw’s critique of the theoretical and ideological orthodoxies advanced by the Afrocentric School. What the critics of Africana thought’s and studies’ intellectual orientation consider to be ideologically neutral or ‘less political’ is not a liability but a plus factor. It is a plus factor in the sense that ideologically loaded academic projects often foster orthodoxies that seldom take kindly to a self-reflexive critique. If anything, a point in case here is the attitude and practice adopted by exponents of Afrocentricity against black and African scholars who, because they differ or point at some of the theoretical gaps and positions in the Afrocentric school, are quite often contemptuously dismissed by Afrocentrists as being ‘Eurocentrist’. Consider the following remark from Asante, ‘The African American and African Eurocentrists are a special problem [...] these are Africans who think they came

to America on the Mayflower and suffer from slave mentality’ (Asante 1999: 114–115; see also Asante 2007: 3).

Ironically, scholars like Mazrui, notwithstanding their critical contributions to black and African scholarship are often the prime targets of Afrocentrists’ vitriolic attacks. While the historical, political and ideological undercurrents surrounding the debates over these admittedly contested academic designations and subsequent labels are understandable, the rigid and simplistic binary through which thought and knowledge about Africa and Africans is presented by Afrocentricity is problematic. The subtle yet critical difference between Afrocentricity and the critical Africana approach, is that while Afrocentricity is characterised by epistemic rigidity, even though still foregrounding black and African concerns in its theorisation –Africana existential philosophy is underpinned by an open approach to knowledge production. Hence, I regard Gordon’s articulation of the Africana theoretical method as the most persuasive to emulate in this study (Alcoff 2003 and Praegs 2011). ‘Persuasive’ is meant in the sense that knowledge and theory production and the forging of a self-reflexive critical work cannot be launched or pinned down to a theoretical method and paradigm that promotes epistemological closure. A responsible theoretical method must also account for the open areas where strands of thought clash, collide and even contradict each other.

Because an Africana theoretical approach, especially as articulated by one of its key protagonists Lewis Gordon, who, as has been noted, constitutes one of the main theoretical guides in this study, facilitates fluidity, it thus fosters, to borrow a phrase from Rey Chow, ‘the

promise of a new epistemological horizon' (Chow 2002: 185).⁴⁹ The choice of an Africana critical approach, is not so much premised on the label but is rather informed by the kind of 'epistemological horizons' that the Africana frame of reference promises to open up, hence the proposed idea of Africana/Islamica existential thought as a way of transcending the discursive concerns within black/Africana existential philosophy. But in what specific sense could Don Mattera be read within this area of enquiry? This demands a brief account of what the notion of existential philosophy implies.

On 'Existential' in Africana/Islamica Existential Thought

Although definitions vary, 'existentialism' is traditionally defined by the *New York Times Guide to Essential Knowledge* as 'a philosophical movement that claims human beings have full responsibility for creating the meaning of their own lives' (2007: 269). This clinical summary might be misleading, though. As John Macquarrie shows in his *Existentialism*, while there are 'family resemblances' among most thinkers and philosophers classified as existentialists, there are also remarkable differences or 'diversity' within what is regarded as existentialist philosophy and thought (1972: 16–18), not to mention that over the years, this philosophic tradition, as Macquarrie has argued, has become 'vulgarised' and, in the process, almost lost the initial meaning given to it by its early founding figures (1972: 13).

⁴⁹ While Rey Chow is referring to a slightly different context and her comment was partly a critique of what she refers to as Fanon's 'anti-colonial ruminations', her remarks are as relevant to black and African scholars faced with the challenge of finding enabling methods that foster openness rather than theoretical closure. For a full discussion, see Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2002), pp. 184–185.

Differences and ‘diversity’ aside, historically it is commonly agreed that ‘the father of modern existentialism’ is the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. In terms of the expression ‘existentialism’ itself, it is generally accepted that Jean-Paul Sartre, the French philosopher, coined the phrase around the mid-twentieth century. Hence, almost all works dealing with existentialist thought feature his name prominently (Macquarrie 1972; Earnshaw 2006). As already noted, like most philosophical movements, existentialism is also underpinned by internal differences and variations among its different protagonists. What is common among such different strands, however, is the preoccupation with human concerns and well-being or, more generally, ‘the concern of the individual within society’. It is for the latter reason that Blackham (1989) in his treatment of six prominent existentialists (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Jaspers, Marcel, Heidegger and Sartre) sums up existentialism as: ‘a philosophy of personal existence’ (Blackham 1989: 149–165). Accordingly, existentialist thought and philosophy has had a serious bearing on how the question of self and subject, in the philosophical sense, is understood.

What is described above, however, refers mostly to European continental philosophy and philosophers linked to the existential philosophical tradition. What about black/Africana existential philosophy, and how similar or different is the latter from its European counterpart? Gordon and several other black existential philosophers address this question extensively. In the first anthology dedicated to a focused deliberation on the subject *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy* (1997), edited by Gordon, a case is made for Black existential philosophy as a different kind of species from European existential philosophy. The question of ‘Black invisibility’, ‘anti-black’ racism, ‘black suffering’ and struggles for black and African emancipation are presented as central themes that constitute the discursive concerns of black/Africana existential philosophy. In other words, against an ‘anti-black

racism' that 'espouses' a common hatred for Black folks, Black and African philosophers have no choice but to take such concerns as the 'stand points', as Henry would call it, for black Existential philosophy (see Gordon 1997: 1 - 9; Henry 197: 15). This is later followed up in Gordon's monograph *Existentialia Africana* (2000) and in his other writings. Taking a lead from Gordon, who asserts that if existential philosophy on the main deals with 'problems of freedom, anguish, dread, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality, and liberation' and that if it deals with these problems by placing a premium on 'the human condition', then certainly it cannot be an exclusively European project. In short, the questions that Africana existential philosophy addresses have long 'preceded' what he calls the 'Kierkegaardian formulations' and questions raised by other Western existentialist philosophers (Gordon 2000: 6 - 7). In other words, all themes central to existential philosophy, such as the ones cited above, are thematic concerns that transcend geography and human divides. They are, in a sense, universal concerns. The key question is *how* are such existential questions and concerns approached by black and African thinkers? But what makes black and Africana existential philosophy of existence unique and hence different, as its protagonists insist it is?

In one of the leading essays by Gordon from *Existence in Black*, titled 'Existential Dynamics of Theorizing Black Invisibility', Gordon maintains that within South Africa, among the few active professional philosophers are Percy Mabogo More and Rozena Maart. Mabogo More, in particular, has sought in most of his writings to articulate a form of Africana existential philosophy through a critical conversation with his black diasporan counterparts. This is where a link with the South African black experience is forged. Mabogo More has done this through a critical analysis of the thought of the late Steve Biko, the leader of the Black Consciousness Movement, by situating Biko as an 'existentialist philosopher'. This is much evident in More's 'Biko: Africana Existential Philosopher' (2008: 45 – 68), an essay first published in 2004 and

which was reprinted as a chapter in *Biko Lives! Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko* (2008). Also, in ‘Gordon and Biko: An Africana Existential Conversation’ (2011), More’s work and argument is harnessed further through a sustained critical conversation with the writings of Lewis Gordon. Biko and his legacy are once more invoked extensively to build a case for a form of Africana or black existential philosophy in South Africa.

Likewise, in the work of Rozena Maart, who was previously in Canada but who is now back in South Africa, a critical black/Africana existential philosophical work is undertaken. In fact, Gordon has aptly summed up Maart’s work not only as drawing on the ‘resources of psychoanalysis and deconstruction’ to critique ‘the dynamics of repression’ but also as questioning ‘white normativity’ (Gordon 2008a: 193; 2008b: 83; see also Maart 2013). The work of both Mabogo More and Maart is preceded, by the critical yet neglected scholarship of Noel Manganyi. Manganyi is among the early scholars to write on the emergence of Black Consciousness in South Africa without the excessive focus on Biko that has become customary of most works dealing with aspects of Black Consciousness in the country. It is thus not surprising to find Gordon and Helgesson in two separate writings, the former on black/Africana existential thought and the latter on South African literary history (and criticism), both describing Manganyi’s work as falling within what can be regarded as ‘existential’ writing of the ‘phenomenological variety’ (Gordon 2008: 193; Helgesson 2004: 77). To a certain extent then, within South Africa, Mabogo More, Rozena Maart and Chabani Manganyi can be counted as representing the rather odd cases of scholars working squarely within what Gordon has identified as a body of work that constitutes the growing scholarship on black/Africana existential philosophy and thought.

Inscribing Islam in Africana Existential Thought

However, what is still a glaring gap within the discussed body of writings is work that foregrounds Islam as a critical category worth interrogating in the scholarship on black/Africana existential philosophy. In the quest to inscribe Islam within black and Africana existential thought and philosophy, no claim is made that this study is unique. To do so would be to ignore, among others, Sherman Jackson's impressive body of work, although Jackson has not self-consciously described his work with the designation black or Africana existential philosophy. However, if his *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection* (2005) and, in particular, his latest work *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (2009) are analysed closely, they can, in my view, be read as works representing an aspect of black or Africana existentialist thought where Islam is factored as a critical category.

Arguing against Jones' notion of 'a racist God' and view on black theodicy, Jackson, drawing extensively on Muslim classical thought, has put forward a counterpoint that, in the words of Bruce Lawrence, is mediated 'through the multiple lenses of Islamic theology' (quoted from the back cover of Jackson 2009). And James H. Cone, the doyen of Black theology, reads Jackson's project as seminal and thus helpful for a deeper 'conversation between Islam and Christianity in the Black community' (quoted from back cover of Jackson 2009). Besides the context of the current study (South Africa and Don Mattera), there are two specific differences in the angle that this researcher takes in contrast with Jackson's work. First, the discursive thrust of Jackson's work is strongly theological in focus, hence Jackson's cautious disclaimer on the 'limits of theology' or theological thinking (Jackson 2009: 161). Of course, the theological bias in Jackson's project can be appreciated when read in the context of

his earlier work *Islam and the Blackamerican* (2005). Jackson's quest was to 'produce' what he terms 'Blackamerican Sunnis [...] theological articulation, that is: a theology that not only 'grows out of' but is also reflective of the 'Blackamerican reality' (Jackson 2009: 161; see also Jackson 2005: 5–6).

Second, Jackson's point of departure has more to do with group and social identities and subjectivities of Blackamerican Muslims. Hence, he addresses their 'challenges' to appropriate the 'Sunni super-tradition', a move that Jackson refers to as 'the Third Resurrection' – that is, as an attempt to forge a collective Blackamerican Muslim identity that is able to fashion 'a dignified, black, American existence without flouting the legitimate aspects of the agenda of Black religion' (Jackson 2005: 5). While the merits of Jackson's project are evident in inscribing Islam as a category worth probing within black/Africana existential philosophy, my own focus is not so much premised on black and African collective and social identities or even on 'communal conversion', which is another term used by Jackson (2005: 6). Nor is the problematic of my study framed in theological terms. Rather, my specific focus is deliberately on individual subjectivity and modes of self-identification, hence my engagement with Africana existential thought and philosophy as the theoretical premise to interpret and read Don Mattera. In so doing, I am in part guided by Gordon and take up the task that both Gordon and Paget Henry have posed as a critical challenge for this emerging field of enquiry. That is, what should be the methodology of Africana thought, and, more specifically, Africana and black philosophies of existence? To this challenge, I add that if Mattera is to be read through the lenses of Africana or black existential philosophy, then the additional question becomes, in what specific sense and context is Mattera open to such an Africana existentialist reading and framing? In addition, how would the current study differ, if it does, from other studies that privilege black/Africana existential thought and philosophy as a mode of enquiry?

On Transcendence as a Theoretical Point of Departure

Based on a critical reading of Don Mattera, it is argued in this study that black/Africana existential philosophy's pre-occupation with the themes of struggle and protest as its major discursive concerns remain inadequate. Accordingly, the study posits what I refer to as a hermeneutic of transcendence. The latter hermeneutic provides a more comprehensive reading and interpretation of a figure like Mattera. Undoubtedly, transcendence is an expansive and complex concept, and given its varied meanings, its usage here warrants some discussion. Veldsman, in 'Transcendence: What on earth are we talking about?', although driven by a theological quest for 'an interdisciplinary conversation between theology and science' on the meaning of transcendence (2011: 247- 255), provides a very useful classification of what can be regarded as different 'models of transcendence'. According to Veldsman, these models of transcendence can be conveniently grouped under 'Immanent transcendence', 'Radical transcendence', 'Radical immanence' and 'transcendence as alterity'. While it is not the intention in this chapter to explain each of these types of transcendence, the models are highlighted do help to indicate the complexity of the concept (Veldsman 2011).

Likewise, Stefanus Rademeyer in a non-theological study titled 'Representations of Transcendence in the Work of Anselm, Kiefer and Anish Kapoor' cautions against using the term indiscriminately. In particular, Rademeyer alerts readers to distinguish between the concept when it is used as an adjective, as in 'transcendental', from when it is used as a noun in 'transcendence' (Rademeyer 2006: 23). Furthermore, John Lachs in a dense essay 'Transcendence in Philosophy and in the Everyday Life' locates transcendence through the matrix of the 'immediate' and 'everyday life'. From such a vantage point, he explores the possibility of taking what he terms 'the philosophy of transcendence' seriously (Lachs

1997:254). While observing the complexity and varied uses of transcendence, such as is the case with the kinds of distinctions that Veldsman, Rademeyer and Lachs make, this study works with a view of transcendence that is informed by how the concept plays itself out as encountered in the data and main protagonist of this study. In other words, a close reading and observation of and critical engagement with this study's data, demands that it would be irresponsible to ignore the persistence of transcendence in a study that focuses on Mattera. Accordingly, transcendence is invoked here as a hermeneutical tool.⁵⁰ That is, not only to analyse and interpret the aesthetic achievements of Mattera as a poet and creative writer but, also, to interrogate Mattera's sense of self and subjectivity beyond his literary presentation. It is in the latter instance that the link, notwithstanding the critique to Gordon, is forged.

Lewis Gordon has provided a useful way of categorising works that traditional philosophical traditions might otherwise simply overlook as 'non-philosophic texts'. In particular, with regard to creative literary works by black and non-black writers, Gordon has

⁵⁰ To be clear, my usage of 'hermeneutic' here is not in the specialist sense of theological and scriptural hermeneutics. For usage in the latter sense, see, for instance, Itumeleng J. Mosala's *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), Gerald West's *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1991) and also Farid Esack's *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997). Rather, hermeneutics as used here is strictly in the sense in which Tsenay Serequeberhan discusses 'hermeneutics of African philosophy' as 'a philosophical orientation' aimed at a critical 'self-awareness' of Africa and Africans and their place in the world. See Tsenay Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 19. Also, for a detailed discussion on philosophical accounts of hermeneutics, see Brice R. Wachterhauser's (ed.), *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

coined what he terms ‘the poeticist–humanist tradition’ (Gordon 2008: 195). In regard to Mattera as a famous poet, writer and activist, the argument here is that a critical reading of his writings can best be situated not only within the category of Gordon’s ‘poeticist–humanist’s tradition’ but also within an existentialist reading. The challenge, however, with situating Mattera within Gordon’s conceptual scheme is that in the current study Mattera is also foregrounded as a Muslim subject. Hence later in this study, Mattera is located within a comparative reading with Malcolm X in order to explore, in line with Gordon’s articulation of Africana existential thought, the possibility of reconfiguring the conventional framings of Africana existential philosophy by foregrounding Islam and black Muslim subjectivity as a critical discursive concern.

Concluding Remarks

The decision to focus on Don Mattera and his work has presented a challenge with regard to which method and theoretical approach would be best suited for a study on him. The challenge arises from the fact that Don Mattera is studied here not simply as an accomplished poet, creative writer and journalist, but, also, as a Muslim subject. This has demanded a mode of enquiry and method capable of providing a comprehensive reading of Mattera’s sense of self, vision and subjectivity. As a result, black/Africana existential thought and philosophy was privileged as a deliberate conceptual and theoretical approach for this dissertation. However, given the range of debates over the contested nature of what is intended by the term ‘Africana studies’ from which Africana existential thought and philosophy is drawn, I have engaged with the criticism posed in particular by radical Afro-centrists. Radical Afrocentric scholars like Asante, Mazama, Zulu, Okafor, and Keto advocate an Afrocentric approach as a method to study the African experience and phenomena. In addition, they are vociferous in the demand

to name what was first termed Black Studies and later Africana, Africology. 'Africology' they maintain besides being 'aesthetically' sound is epistemologically appropriate. The term represents, through the 'afro-centric approach,' a liberating study of the black and African experience through emphasis on the 'quality of location' and 'agency' of Africans in their global spread.

While noting the criticism posed Afro-centrists, I have intentionally selected to work with the designation Africana existential philosophy and thought. In doing so, the choice is not arbitrary. Rather working with the designation Africana registers a discursive distance and an epistemological shift from Afrocentricity's foundationalist and essentialist claims to the study of the black and African experience. This is not to say, however, that Africana existential philosophy does not suffer from its own discursive limitations. Africana existential philosophy's insistence on placing a premium on the ethos of struggle and suffering, I argue in the light of the study on Don Mattera, fosters discursive and epistemic limitation. Hence, this study calls for broadening the discursive concerns within Africana existential philosophy and thought beyond themes of struggle and protest. One way of achieving this is by inscribing and taking among other concerns, Islam as a critical discursive concern, more especially, as it is embodied in Black Muslim subjects like Don Mattera. Such an emphasis has prompted this dissertation to foreground what is termed a hermeneutic of transcendence. In particular, I argue in the subsequent chapters, that transcendence in both the Sartrean sense of inter-subjective

transcendence, and, Levinasian sense of transcendence as a gesture towards the beyond and the metaphysical permeates the work of Mattera and is reflected in his self-understanding.⁵¹

⁵¹ The relevance of Sartre and Levinas in the context of this study is discussed in detail in Chapter Six where notions of transcendence as they pertain to the work of Don Mattera and his self-understanding are probed.

CHAPTER FOUR

REREADING MATTERA'S POETRY: THE 'BARD OF LIBERATION' AND 'POET OF COMPASSION'

You will remember how Plato, in his model state, deals with poets. He banishes them from public interest. He had a high conception of the power of poetry [...]. (Benjamin 1986 [1978]:220)

Poetry today might have more to teach us than [...] the human sciences and psychoanalysis combined. (guattari 1995 [1992] :21)

But Don Mattera is more than an authentic militant for the black cause, he is also one of the most significant poets of [his] generation. (Alvarez-Pereyre 1984:196)

Introduction: Plotting a Reading of Mattera's Poetry

In *Reading after Theory*, musing about the place of theory in literary criticism, Cunningham writes in regard to critical readers that 'the reader, and so also the reading, always arrives in some sense preformed, prejudging, prejudiced, predisposed, by ideas about how reading is done, and what to expect from the kind of text which is presented [...]' (2002: 4). Accordingly, Cunningham asserts that readers 'arrive at a book', or any other text for that matter, 'simply laden with presuppositional reading baggage, much of which is, inevitably, of a literary-theoretical kind' (2002: 4). This frank description of the relationship between the critical reader and a given text sums up my stance in this chapter for reading Don Mattera's poetry. My 'reading baggage', as it were, is based on a quest to read Mattera's poetry slightly differently than how it has been read before – that is, as merely a protest and hence confined to 'literature of protest' or 'combat' (see Vancini 2006: 197–213; Shava 1989: 1). The argument advanced

here is that the simplistic description of Mattera's poetry, though correct in one sense, is misleading. To say this is not to deny Mattera's location within the context of protest poetry. By protest poetry I refer to poetry that is generally associated with writers from the Black Consciousness Movement; thus, it has also been called 'Black consciousness poetry' (Mzamane 1987; Attwell 2005; Chapman 2007; Mashige 2007). To underpin the political tenor of Mattera's poetry, Magubane has described Mattera as 'the bard of liberation'. Furthermore, Magubane has described Mattera as a poet whose writing 'and poetry about the black condition and struggles in South Africa' stems 'not from contemplation but from the thick of struggle' (Magubane 2009: ix [1987]). If this is how Mattera is viewed as a writer and poet, then how, and on what grounds, can an alternative reading of his poetry beyond the theme of protest and struggle be advanced? And if an alternative reading is advanced at all, is such an alternative reading sustainable?

Generally, in terms of reading poetry, literary critics (and literary criticism) often employ a poet-centred approach to poetry. Alternatively, another approach is to privilege the text, or, more accurately, 'the ontology of the poem as an independent text'. While the latter approach is self-explaining, the poet-centred approach is informed by the idea that poetry is 'an expression of the poet's emotions *and imagination*.' This approach is also known as 'phenomenological criticism' because it is based on focusing on 'the personality behind the work', namely the 'author' (Peck & Coyle 1984: 9–10; 158–160). However, while both approaches have their merits, the approach selected in this chapter avoids making the distinction between either the poet-centred approach or a bias towards the ontology of the poem. The chapter adopts a thematic approach and draws, where possible, on both approaches.

The Poet and His Work: An Overview

As noted in Chapter One, it is rather odd that Don Mattera has not received much academic attention as a writer and poet. Mattera's critics, except for a few, have failed to notice the aesthetic achievement and complexity in his literary output. The simplistic and fragmentary reading of Mattera is due to an analysis of his poetry that has focused mainly on the popularly known *Azanian Love Song* (1983).⁵² However, since the publication of the work in the 1980s,⁵³ Mattera has also published five more poetry anthologies. These are *Exiles Within* (1986); a collection with seven other poets), *Inside the Heart of Love* (1997), *They Passed this Way and Touched our Lives* (2008), *The Moon is Asleep* (2008) and *Fractured Faces* (2012).

Given Mattera's poetic output, which clearly stretches beyond his work that was published during the apartheid years, any responsible reading must engage this larger work. The problem with a fragmentary reading of his poetry is that it has promoted a stereotype that fails to notice some of the themes in Mattera's poetic vision and output that transcend the immediacy of context and time. The aim of this chapter, therefore, besides questioning the fragmentary readings of Mattera's poetry, is to search for an alternative reading that considers Mattera's complexity of vision as a poet.

⁵² Given its popularity, the work has seen two extra editions. The second edition was in 1994 by Justified Press and followed by the third edition published in 2007.

⁵³ In fact, some of the poems within *Azanian Love Song* were written much earlier but could not be published since Mattera was a banned person.

Search for ‘Complexity of Vision’ in Mattera’s Poetry: An Intertextual Reading

In the quest to search for depth and complexity of poetic vision in Mattera’s poetry, the chapter will focus on the poetry that was published both during and after the apartheid era and read it together. To mediate the different anthologies, the reading strategy adopted here is to privilege a thematic focus that foregrounds both an existential as well as an intertextual reading of Mattera’s poetry. What is meant by an ‘existential reading’ is one that identifies in Mattera’s poetry concepts and ideas associated with what Paget Henry has called ‘existential standpoints’ or what Gordon has termed ‘dimensions’ (Henry 1997: 15; Gordon 1997: 7; see also Ansari 1978: 121).⁵⁴ To foreground an existentialist reading is not to stereotype Mattera as an existentialist writer or poet. Rather, it is to argue that a critical reading of his poetry (and fiction, as illustrated in the next chapter) is open to an existential reading if all the salient themes and concepts associated with ‘existential standpoints’ are considered. Such ‘standpoints’ or existential concepts range from the quest for ‘authentic living’, which is itself a complex notion, to alienation and angst while also touching on the paradox of despair and hope, anguish and even preoccupation with the theme of death (Gordon 1997: 7).

The problem with a thematic focus, as Lloyd Brown, with reference to the Caribbean poet Braithwaite has pointed out, is that rather than view the poet ‘as a complex artist’, a thematic focus runs the risk of limiting the poet to merely ‘a compiler of historical statements’ and an immediate reflection on ‘experience’. In particular, critics like Brown caution that the thematic focus not only strips the poet of a ‘sophisticated awareness of the nature of his [her]

⁵⁴ For an example of an existential approach, see, for instance, Ansari, A, ‘An Approach to Iqbal’. In *Iqbal: Essays and Studies*, by A.A. Ansari (ed.), pp. 121–144. New Delhi: Ghalib Academy.

own art as poet'⁵⁵ but also that the selected themes might be premised on the critic's own set of prejudice that could easily obscure the poet's work. As a safeguard against obscuring the poet's work, Mattera's different anthologies are read together through what can be termed an 'intertextual' reading. Although the latter notion also connotes a complex approach to reading,⁵⁶ the usage of intertextual here is rather in the minimalist sense. It refers to reading Don Mattera through and against himself.

While a search for a complexity of vision is common practice in reading poetry, I am indebted for this idea to Nwuneli's reading of Amiri Baraka's poetry, especially the latter's *Black Magic Poetry*. Detecting a failure to read Baraka through his 'larger poetic context', Nwuneli has observed how most of Baraka's critics have failed to appreciate the complexity of his poetic vision and 'aesthetic achievement'. In other words, because Baraka's poems are read 'individually' and are thus divorced from their fuller poetic context, Baraka's critics have failed to read him 'in detail' and have offered only a caricature of Baraka and his poetry. The warning by Nwuneli is clear: readings of 'isolated anthology pieces give a very distorted picture of a poet's complexity of vision' (Nwuneli 1987: 3). As a result, Baraka's complexity of vision as a poet is obscured. This chapter makes a similar argument with regard to how Mattera's poetry has been treated similarly by his critics. For instance, Don Mattera's poetry, which is often compared with that by James Mathews, a Cape Town-based writer and poet who is one of Mattera's contemporaries, has been commonly treated under the rubric of protest poetry or poetry of 'black consciousness' (Adhikari 2003; Mzamane 1987: 43). A case in point is

⁵⁵ Lloyd W. Brown, 'Braithwaite,' In *Common Wealth Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 41.

⁵⁶ For a comprehensive discussion on intertextuality, see, for instance, Marry Orr's *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2003).

Mashige's doctoral study 'Post-apartheid emerging identities in South African literature' (2007). What is curious to note about this study is that while it has chapters that range from 'Poetry of the Self' and 'Revolutionary Poetry' to 'Worker Poetry' and 'Feminist Poetry', Don Mattera's poetry is treated under the chapter titled 'Black Consciousness Poetry'. Mashige opines, without even attempting to problematise the designation 'protest poetry' as it pertains to Mattera, that Mattera's poetry 'represents a poetic oeuvre that came to be known as "Black Consciousness Poetry"' (Mashige 2007).⁵⁷ Given the autobiographical tone and self-referential elements in some of Mattera's poetry, on what basis, for instance, does Mashige exclude Mattera's poetry from what is designated the 'Poetry of the Self' in his study?

Similarly, Piniel Shava's *People's Voice: Black South African Writing in the Twentieth Century* makes a similar claim. Shava characterises both Don Mattera and James Matthews as the 'two angriest' poets of the Black Consciousness Movement (Shava 1989: 7). While there is nothing wrong with reading Mattera under the category of Black Consciousness poetry, the problem with such a stereotype is that it entraps Mattera's poetry within the limits and context of protest literature in South Africa. Of course, given Mattera's pivotal role in Black Consciousness, he is quite explicit about the political commitment of his poetry. This can be gleaned from various interviews and presentations that he has made while wearing the cap of a literary critic. For example, in an address titled 'The role of the Black Writer in Racist South Africa' (1986a), and in an article 'Literature for Liberation' (1986b), Mattera's stance is

⁵⁷ See also Piniel Viriri Shava, *A People's Voice: Black South African Writing in the Twentieth Century* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1989) p.7; Michael Chapman, *Soweto Poetry: Literary Perspectives* (2007 [1982]); Ernest N. Emenyonu, *Black Culture and Black Conscious Literature* (1987) and Lee Sustar and Aisha Karim, *Poetry and Protest: A Dennis Brutus Reader* (2006). See also Rafaela Vancini, 'Beyond the Literature of Protest: *Underground People*,' in *Critical Perspective on Lewis Nkosi: Still Beating the Drum* (2006).

unambiguous. He asserts that 'the Black writer should at all times remember that he or she does not live or exist in a vacuum. He/she is moulded and shaped by the same blood and dust as his people.' Like other black writers, Mattera is quite conscious of his role as a creative writer and artist and asserts that his writing must have a purpose. However, his articulation of the role of the black writer in society is also self-reflexive. This evident in Mattera's statement and subtle disclaimer. In writing with a purpose, Mattera insists that such writing must nevertheless not sacrifice 'aesthetic authority and able craftsmanship' (1986a: 9).

Clearly, the tension between political commitment and the purpose of writing is something that Mattera grapples with. This is further evident in his statement that inasmuch as there is a need to satisfy 'aesthetic authority', the writer or poet must still be able to 'give practical meaning to his ideals and passion' (Mattera 1986a:9). Given Mattera's affirmation, the argument pressed here is not premised on depoliticising the poet. Rather, the call is for a more nuanced reading. One of the more perceptive critics of Mattera is Alvarez-Pereyre. Despite still reading Mattera within the context of protest literature, Alvarez-Pereyre is more circumspect. Using the expression 'poetry of commitment' rather than 'protest', Alvarez-Pereyre concedes that Mattera is more than just a voice of protest. For him, Mattera's poetry is characterised by what Alvarez-Pereyre has described as 'a didactic' element (Alvarez-Pereyre 1984). In other words, true to Mattera's take on his role as an artist, his poetry must have a purpose. This being the case, the poet nevertheless is still conscious of 'aesthetic authority' and the danger of sacrificing poetic 'craftsmanship'. Seemingly, many readers of Mattera are not attentive to the latter disclaimers by the poet.

The argument made thus far is that except for a perceptive reader like Alvarez-Pereyre, most of Mattera's readers have offered a limited interpretation of his poetry and promote the

stereotype of his leadership in protest literature. The consequence of such a stereotype is that it has entrenched a distorted view of Mattera's poetry. Such a view implies that Mattera's poetry can only be read within the limited context of its historical, political and social context, suggesting that beyond these contexts, it lacks any universal content.

To emphasise the latter sentiments is not to downplay the historicity of Mattera's poetry. Rather, the critique that is pursued questions the epistemic closure that the conventional reading of his poetry cited here have entrenched – namely, a narrow and one-dimensional reading that fails to unpack the myriad other themes that transcend what is caricatured as protest poetry. When reading Mattera's anthologies intertextually, they are layered with a range of concepts that echo familiar existential themes and tropes, such as alienation, anguish, despair, death, mourning, hope, love and the quest for authenticity.

While the frequency of these existential concepts differ from anthology to anthology, where some themes are expressed more regularly than others, alienation is one that is already identified by Killian in her limited but impressive honours study on Mattera. I agree with her insightful observation that 'Don Mattera, is not simply a "protest poet"'. This is a critical observation, especially if one considers that Killian's observation is within the context of *Azanian Love Song* and a few other apartheid-era writings by Mattera. What Killian achieves, is the debunking of the stereotype of Mattera as an angry poet. She proves that Mattera's critics, like Shava referred to earlier, 'have ignored the compassion evident in his writings'. This is so, notwithstanding the fact that the poet has 'experienced different levels of alienation as a result of his oppressed existence'. Killian maintains that apartheid failed to dehumanise the poet or make Mattera harbour enmity against his oppressors (Killian 1994: 77–78). Likewise, Alvarez-Pereyre has observed the same, and has noted how 'Mattera's basic humanism' was not tainted

by hate (Alvarez-Pereyre 1980: 4). The latter observation finds ample support in one of Mattera's poems 'And Yet'; and it is worth citing the poem in a shortened form.

I have known silences
Long as deep as death
When the mind questioned the logic
Of my frailty
In the imminence of my destruction
By men ruled by powerlust [...]

And yet,
I cannot hate
Try as I want,
I cannot hate

Why? (Mattera 2007: 42; also quoted in Alvarez- Pereyre 1980: 13 - 14).

Of course, it could be argued by other literary critics of Mattera's work that by citing exceptional and hence, a limited, selection of Mattera's poems, denies the obvious: that the bulk of evidence shows that most of Mattera's poetry is politically charged and committed to issues of African pride and Black Consciousness. Otherwise, why would he be dubbed the 'bard of liberation' and his poetry its 'hymn book'? (Magubane 2009 [1987]: ix). Without denying this assertion, the focus here is not so much premised on a denial of the political content in Mattera's poetry; rather, the chapter posits an alternative reading that is mostly missing in the dominant readings. Mattera's poem 'And Yet' already cited is not an exception. Nor are critics of Mattera's poetry like Killian denying the political tenor of his poetry. A few examples of poems from *Azanian Love Song* might help to elucidate this observation.

A poem like 'Sea and Sand' was written during the peak of apartheid, and its content, though political, is deeply textured and provides possibilities of reading in ways that defy the characterisation of Mattera as an angry poet. After invoking 'God' to sanctify a beleaguered continent by blessing its 'angry mountains and the smiling hills', the poet turns his attention to children, as the following lines indicate:

Bless the children of South Africa
the white children
And the black children
But more the black children
Who lost the sea and the sand?
That they may not lose love
For the white children

Whose father raped the land. (Mattera 2007 [1983]: 86)

Compare this poem with another one: 'Let the Children Decide'. In a sense, 'Let the Children Decide' speaks back to 'Sea and Sand'. In fact, one anonymous reader of Mattera's poetry has described the latter poem as a form of 'social criticism' that pays attention to 'an end of racism for the sake of children'.⁵⁸ The reader compares Mattera in this poem with the African America poet James McBride in the latter's 'The Colour of Water'. The similarity between the two is that both poets 'question [and] dismiss race as merely a social category'. In other words, the poets seek a way to transcend the inadequacy of racial categories, as reflected in the stanza from Mattera's poem:

Let us halt this quibbling
Of reform and racial preservation
Saying who belongs to which nation
And let the children decide
It is their world. (Mattera 2007 [1983]:16)

Add to the above set of poems 'Then will I know', as extracted from *Exiles Within* (1984), and the picture of an angry poet begins to disappear. As noted by Killian, Mattera's sense of 'compassion' is an indication that apartheid had failed to dehumanise the poet or make him harbour enmity against his oppressors (Killian 1994: 77–78). It is worth referring to some of the lines in 'Then I will Know' that undergird Killian's observation. Although a long poem, it

⁵⁸ See the posting 'Has anybody read the poem "let the children decide" by Don Mattera'? Available: <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=2007031101392AAVKzJ>. [2009, February 27]

resonates with hope and is devoid of any traces of enmity for when freedom dawns or ‘when at last it comes’:

when the final thrashing’s done
and arrogant chaff blown out of the wind
and the fields restored
then shall our stones grind
Without force of whips
then shall the wheat of true humanism
produce a New Bread for our sons
and for the sons of them
who now holds us captive [...]. (Mattera 1984: 42)

The poems cited here reinforce the idea that the poet – inasmuch as he has been denied freedom and, as Mphahlele has noted, knows the ‘the pain of being banned’ (Mphahlele 2007 [1993]: viii) – has not allowed pain to stunt his humanity and sense of compassion. In addition, this element of Mattera’s humanity and compassion is captured in the citation when an honorary doctorate was conferred on him by Wits University. For example, the citation noted that whereas Mattera’s writing ‘rails the injustice of apartheid’, it simultaneously ‘declares that hate and vengeance perpetuate vicious cycles of death and further retribution.’ Accordingly, the citation further credits Mattera’s writing for having ‘foreshadowed many of the debates on remembering that surrounded the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’ (Wits Graduation Brochure 14 April 2009: 10–11).

Read within the generic rubric of black South African writing, the characterisation of Mattera’s writing above certainly calls for a more engaged reading of his work. Moreover, it questions the dismissive depiction of black writers as being incapable of ‘transcending’ their ‘situation sufficiently’ and hence fail to attain ‘universality’ (Wanjala 2006: 36; Helgesson

2004: 17). While, it is correct that writers like Mattera are products of their time, their close reading reveals more than this banal view on black writing. There is also a quest in Mattera's poetry to transcend the vulgar of his time with an almost teleological thrust to chart a vision of a better society. This is evident in lines in the poem cited earlier, such as 'where the wheat of true Humanism' will 'produce a New Bread for our sons and for the sons of them who now hold us captive'. The reconciliatory tone and quest for a better society and for healing are unmistakable. This can be interpreted as a transcendent impulse, where there is a desire to transcend the brutalities of the past 'when the final thrashing's done', 'without force of whips' but with compassion (Mattera 1986: 42). In fact, in an interview with Ian Hamilton on the nature of his poetry, Mattera responded: 'I lay my poems at the altar of my people.' In the same interview, Mattera simultaneously balances that statement with the disclaimer that 'our poetry *must also give hope; death is not the end*' (Mattera 1987).⁵⁹

What is critical concerning the poems referred to thus far is that such poems were not the outcome of the post-apartheid moment and fetish of reconciliation. These poems were written when apartheid was still kicking. Of course, reference to the poems must not be confused as employing a reading that seeks to sanitise Mattera's poetry from political engagement and commitment. On the contrary, like the poems of other black writers of his generation, such as James Matthews, Es'kia Mphahlele, Bessie Head, Mongane Serote, Dennis Brutus and Lewis Nkosi, as Lombardozzi has observed, 'are directly related to the social and historical perceptions of the poet at the time of writing' (Lombardozzi 2006 :127). This view of black writing, and, with specific reference to Don Mattera, though correct in one sense, is

⁵⁹ This was a special Television interview for Bookmark BBC Two program and hosted by Ian Hamilton. Available: www.Genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/schedules/bbctwo/england/1987-02-05. [2013, June 5].

highly problematic. It must be corrected, especially when considered in the light of Mattera's poems that are universal and thus transcend the immediate history and context of his writing. As the poems 'Sea and Sand', 'And Yet', 'Let the Children Decide' and 'Then I Will Know' illustrate, it is a misnomer to read these poems as merely verses of protest and thus limited to their historical and socio-political context.

If *Azanian Love song* were to be read intertextually with Mattera's *Inside the Heart of Love* (1997), which is unmistakably personal and meditative, Mattera's poetry can easily be read as 'poetry of the self.' Consider the poem 'Presence' where the language of the poet is clearly abstract. Through a deployment of words like 'mind' and 'memory', as captured in the lines where the poet's imagination is stretched beyond the immediacy of the now and surroundings but rather turns inward:

My mind
and this room
they are never empty.
You breathe
in my thoughts.
the presence of your spirit
abides in my seeking.
and in my soul [...].

Quite curiously, the 'you' is kept vague and anonymous. Could this 'you' be a referent to a missed lover, real and ephemeral? Or, is 'you' a referent to the Divine? Based on a close analysis of Mattera's poetry, I argue the 'you' in this poem refers to a missed companion. Customarily, when Mattera refers to the Divine, as reflected in all his anthologies, and especially *Azanian Love Song*, the poet does not shy away from invoking the epithet 'God' directly. The mysterious 'you' could therefore entail a number of meanings besides the ones suggested here, where the poem is deeply personal in tone and is hence open to be read as

poetry of the self. This view finds support in the brief comments offered by Stephen Laufer in his description of *Inside the Heart of Love*. Careful enough not to valorise Mattera's poetry, Laufer asserts that the anthology represents a 'collection of poems [that] allows cracks of light to fall on an essentially private world' of 'love [...] despair and joy' (1997 [1993]).

Undoubtedly, a comprehensive reading of Mattera's poetry calls for a collective reading of his poems. *The Moon is Asleep*, *Inside the House of Love* and some of the poems in *Exiles Within* can easily be read as if one were still reading *Azanian Love Song*. This reading of the poems together further underpins the fact that, inasmuch as Mattera's poetry is political, his poetry also transcends politics and touches on matters that pertain to the self. In particular, the theme of love is taken up with great zeal in *The Moon is Asleep* which can be described as falling under the illusive category of 'Love Poetry'.⁶⁰ Mattera has commented on this work at length:

Love poetry, with all its known and unknown inconsistencies and varying degrees of emotional articulation, will always find interested, curious and endearing audiences, mostly because people are the central focus of such expositions. There are innumerable forms of Love poetry, most of which defy definition or even literary categorisation [...].

Mattera explains further, and asserts that Love poetry,

Despite what academics may opine in their attempts to unravel that deep and unpredictable domain called the Human Heart, and its proximity to the emotional meridians of our beings. Poetry that speaks of love felt, sought and declared. Love found and lost; unrequited; of having loved in vain. Of love retrieved, renewed, relived [...]. Joy, happiness and other boons of bliss. (Mattera in cover of *The Moon is Asleep*, 2008)

⁶⁰ See S.L. Bermann, 'Love Poetry,' in Roland Green (ed.), *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 814–820.

While noting the ‘boons of bliss’ that love bestows, in Mattera’s typical writing style, the dialectic and paradox of love is also framed as a double-edged sword when Mattera notes in the same comment:

But then again and again, comes the binding and holding [...]. Estrangement; acrimony and enmity piercing flesh, vein bone and blood, and even the spirit. These are some of the risks and consequences of giving and wanting to receive love [...]. The longing, the loneliness. The distance and the dangers of re-occurrence: the vacuum, the emptiness, the dying [...]. (Mattera 2008)

Mattera’s commentary on the complications of love provides a reflexive subtext to his love poems and gives a glimpse of the humanist side of the poet. Although some of the poems are about romantic love, in some of the poems ‘love’ is invoked to refer to the poet’s familial relationships, such as regarding the occasion of the 14th birthday of his son, Don Mangaliso. Fatherly love and affection resonate throughout the last stanzas of the poem ‘Yesterday, When the Moon was Full’:

You cuddled in my weary arms
Mumbling words I could not understand,
Then you smiled
And laughed in your sleep
And I wished
I was inside your dreams. (Mattera 2008: 55)

The line ‘Mumbling words I could not understand’ provides a clue that the poet is here reminiscing about his son when the 14-year-old Mangaliso was still an infant. The poem, in its longer version, concludes with the poet affirming fatherly love with the deep, familiar words, ‘I love you.’

Another poem worth noting is ‘I am nothing’, which has a mystical ring. As it is a rather long poem, it is better to capture it at some length to avoid its distortion:

I am nothing
Have nothing
Neither gold nor jewel to give you
Save these mad words

The erratic stanzas
Men call poems [...]
Stark
Raving phrases
Tormented verbs
In search of logic
This breath is all I possess [...]

The poem continues in a self-deprecating fashion, echoing the poet's frailties and lack of possessions:

I am nothing
I have nothing
But a love song
To touch your eyes
With passionate blood
Rushing through the vein of my pen,
Creating life of words
Unending,
Infinite
I am something, now
I have you. (Mattera 1986: 108)

At once possessing a mystical ring and a self-deprecating tone, the poem is nevertheless self-reflexive and illuminates human vulnerability. The poet not only expresses a sense of indebtedness for the gift of love but also conveys how, in the absence of material possessions, all he can offer, no matter how inadequate, is the gift of love expressed in his 'erratic stanzas'. Contrast this with 'Vines and Grapes'. Although this poem was published in *The Moon is Asleep*, it was first written in 1988, a time when apartheid still reigned supreme. Yet it is also a love poem in which the poet, through the metaphor of 'grapes and vines', speaks about longing and intimacy:

The grapes of longing and need
Ferment in the casket of my being
For a day we were drunk with intimacy
And swayed like leaves
In the autumn sky,
Bronzed by the heat of mutual hunger.

As the poem continues, the message becomes clearer:

Come, let us again drink
The wines of fulfillment,
Savour the healing flow of love
And memories of time and place [...].

To return to the first of the three poems mentioned above, ‘Yesterday [...]’ (from *The Moon is Asleep*), apparently reflects familial love, in this case that of a father for his son. The second, ‘I am nothing’ (from *Azanian Love Song*), and the third, ‘Of Vines and Grapes’, however, are clearly about romantic love. By exposing this soft and compassionate side of the poet, the stereotype of Mattera as an ‘angry’ poet is dispelled. These poems represent only a fraction of similar poetic output from Mattera; this output includes poems that, in addition to containing complex themes of love, defy the stereotype of the political poet.

Mattera’s *They Passed this Way and Touched our Lives* (2008), adds another prominent theme in his poetic output and writing, namely memory and remembering. In contrast to *The Moon is Asleep* which the poet autographed with the words ‘a document of veracity for those who believe in the power of love’, *They Passed this Way* is autographed as ‘Laudations of past and present stalwarts’⁶¹. In deciphering these two descriptions and reading the content of the latter work, it is clear that the focus is different. The latter anthology pays tribute to and remembers both past and present heroes who have played a critical role in the history of South Africa. The tone of this volume is both nostalgic and hopeful for a better society. It is nostalgic in the sense that some of the heroes or ‘stalwarts’ referred to by the poet range from known political figures such as Lillian Ngoyi, a prominent woman in the African National Congress who led the famous women’s march against Strydom’s Nationalist Party government in the

⁶¹ Personal copies autographed by Mattera in 18 July 2011 and 7 August 2011.

1960s, to the slain leader of the South African Communist Party Chris Hani, the late Black Consciousness leader and medical doctor Abubakr Asvat, Thabo Mbeki and Ellen Khuzwayo. There are several poems for Mandela, Sobukwe and Biko, in addition to poems celebrating artists and writers like Nadine Gordimer, Miriam Makeba and Aggrey Klaaste. Other poems are dedicated to victims of unintended disasters, such as the soccer fans who died at Ellis Park Stadium in Johannesburg on 11 April 2001 due to stampede.⁶² These are only a few poems amongst many that are captured in this anthology. From this array of names that cut across racial, political and ideological divides, as well as the content of the individual poems themselves, I contend, this work is an indictment against the simple characterisation of Mattera's poetry as simply being protest and Black Consciousness poetry. It is also a poetry of remembering the past. However, it is a remembering that is not captive to the past but transcends it with the hope for a better future.

The Paradoxical and the Dialectical in Mattera's Poetry

One of the features of Don Mattera's poetry, is that it is underpinned by a dialectical texture or what can alternatively be referred to as a creative paradox. Although there are poems in *They Passed this Way* that fit the descriptions of protest such as the dehumanisation of blacks and their suffering, the poet's compassion and sensibilities permeate through those poems. As observed by Laufer, the work not only reflects a more 'matured language' – that is, one 'finding images that have an almost serene quality' – but it also underpins what some of Mattera's discerning readers have identified as the 'poet of compassion' (Davie 2002). The

⁶² See SAHO Website. Available: www.dotsahistory.org.za. [2017, February 3].

compassionate poet has co-existed with ‘the bard of liberation.’ Consider these lines, taken from *They Passed this Way* (2008), from the poem ‘Steve Biko’:

How vividly we waited for your son
how tightly we held the sun to our hearts [...]

We held back the tears
suspended the pain
but the blood burnt our eyes,
the sun slipped from our hands
taking away the Biko flames
quenching what little light remained [...]

Still,
we waited Steve,
knowing you would emerge [...]
from the graves singing Songs of Blackness
undying,
eternal (Mattera 2008: 25).

The above poem is undoubtedly written as a homage to Steve Biko, one of the founders of the Black Consciousness Movement. However, as argued, the voice of the poet resonates with compassion and a tender tone. More significantly, such compassion is not as a result of a sudden shift. As noted with ‘Sea and Sand’ from Mattera’s early anthology, the voice of the poet in the heat of apartheid resonates with a compassion that not only relates to suffering but also speaks of the triumph of the human spirit, and thus transcends the colour line. Also, consider the following tribute to Nadine Gordimer, an anti-apartheid activist and fellow creative writer of fiction:

When days were at their darkest,
night hid our pain
and gunsmoke smothered our dreams,
while others cowered in castles
declaring commitment in safe havens
to a cause they did not truly support nor understand
Your life, your love
your gifts of caring and depiction,
gave warmth to the night,
turned ice to sunlight

You among the masses
Carrying the burner of justice,
The flag of impending victory
Giving meaning to struggle and sacrifice

As the poem concludes, the voice of the poet turns into a direct conversation with Gordimer and addresses her by her first name:

Nadine,
May life be good and kind to you
As you were to the nation (Mattera 2008: 11).

This poem can be read together with 'Bulwark', a poem that appears in the anthology *They Passed this Way* (2008). It was written as a homage to Ruth First, the slain wife of the former secretary general of the South African Communist Party Joe Slovo, and reads as follows:

When acrimony comes
gauntlet to down
and poison tongues beshrew
and place upon this earth,
only a healing flow of empathy

can relieve the ailing
can call renewal to our bones
and rebuild the crumbling house (Mattera 2008: 13).

In reaching out to Nadine Gordimer and Ruth First, Mattera is reaching out not just to fellow writers but also fellow South Africans despite these writers being racialised as the white other. This point is crucial, especially if one considers the polemics around the position of black writers against their white compatriots. Take, for example, the stance adopted by Richard Rive, another black writer. Not necessarily antagonistic to white writers,⁶³ Rive distances himself

⁶³ See, for instance, Richard Rive's poem 'Where the rainbow ends'. In *Breaking the Poetry Barrier*. Compiled by DJ. Brindley (Johannesburg: Heinemann, 1995), pp. 156–7. The tone of the poem captures the theme of reconciliation, as reflected in this stanza: 'there is no such tune as a Black tune, there is no

from white writing by making this distinction: ‘no matter how sincere and motivated the white writer is, he or *she*, is ‘writing about the subject of racial discrimination’ from the comfort zone of privilege. On the contrary, ‘the Black writer is writing from within the subject of racial discrimination’ (Rive 1984: 92). Although it is not this study’s intention to deal with the polemics of white versus black writing, it is evident that there is a subtle mockery and stigmatisation of the white writer and, by inference, dismissal of him/her in Rive’s statements. On the contrary, in Mattera’s homage to Gordimer and Ruth First, racial barriers are collapsed and hence transcended as the poet gives tribute to fellow South Africans regardless of racial classification. This sensibility in Mattera is reflective of the poet’s compassion and ability to transcend racial barriers.

Transcendence and ‘Implicit’ Religiosity in Mattera’s Poetry

Another dimension of Mattera’s poetry that is obscured by its conscription to protest poetry is what might be termed ‘implicit’ religiosity (Hutch 1997: 2 - 4). Hutch has identified Kierkegaard, and fiction writers such as ‘Dostoevsky, Camus, Wiesel’ and O’Connor as ‘generally writers’ whose works have ‘a religious bearing’ and, by inference, implicit religiosity (Hutch 1997: 4). That is, unlike ‘explicit religion’, which represents a ‘core or set of personal beliefs’ and is thus an open ‘spiritual awareness’ (Hutch 1997: 2), implicit religiosity or ‘religion’ is not marked by such open confessions. Reflections on Mattera’s poetry in this chapter will be concluded by exploring, whether this idea of implicit religion or

tune as White tune, there’s only music [...] And it’s the music we’re going to sing [...]. Rive 1995, p. 157.

religiosity and, by inference, the notion of transcendence might not provide one of the useful ways for interpreting Mattera's poetry beyond the rhetoric of the political.

To foreground this reflection, I shall refer to one of the writers that Hutch has mentioned, Albert Camus. The reference to Camus might seem rather odd. After all, from the various biographies on him, Camus' position concerning religion and matters of belief is public knowledge. Yet Camus is often categorised as an existentialist writer whose fiction is full of religious themes. Camus, therefore, represents a good example of a writer whereby the idea of an implicit religion can be taken up. One such study is Rose Reznick's dissertation on 'Alienation and Albert Camus: A General and Religious Critique' (1976). In making sense of Camus, Reznick views Camus as 'an existentialist' writer whose 'thinking is in the midst of life'. Life, of course, includes the presence of religion. Although Reznick does not say this explicitly, it is implied in her study of Camus, hence her disclaimer: 'No apology is offered for viewing Camus in a religious light.' She adds: 'Though an avowed atheist, his hunger for intelligibility in the midst of life's contingency provides justification for introducing religious dimensions.' Inasmuch as Camus was an atheist, his search or 'deep need' to experience 'the sacred', which had 'eluded him' prompted Camus to turn to myth to fill 'the vacuum' (Reznick 1976: 5). In other words, the turn to myth or mythical characters and their universe 'became' Camus' 'substitute for faith and the metaphors of religion' that had eluded him in his lived experience.

Now, why this reference to Albert Camus? The intention is to drive a simple point: the religious or the expression of the religious, whether in fiction or in the real world, is not always a straightforward affair. Mattera's poetry is also layered with religious themes. And were Mattera to be studied in contrast with Camus, Don Mattera's life experience would evidently be very different from that of Camus, who disowns religiosity and denies transcendence in the

metaphysical sense. To be sure, as a writer Don Mattera does not flaunt his religiosity for the public gallery, even though he is known to be ‘a highly religious man’ in his real life and deeply spiritual (Sesanti 2002: 123). This said, it is striking how a number of poems in *Azanian Love Song* are existentially religious in content.

Out of the anthology’s 101 poems, approximately 14 of them make an explicit reference to God; in others, reference to the Divine is implied. Without referring to all of the poems with a direct reference to God, an instructive example that is worth a reflection is the poem ‘Man to Man’, where the poet is in direct conversation with the Divine. The poem is captured here as it appears in the anthology. As if in jest, it begins with the exclamation,

Great God
I sometimes wonder how strong you are
What awful cosmic tension
Throbs inside your restless brain
Why in the scheme of conception

Did you include pain. (Mattera 2007 [1983]: 19)

The poet begins by invoking the Divine as ‘Great God’. Note how the opening stanza ‘Great God’ is given eminence through the layout and typesetting on the page as if to mark the distance between Metaphysical transcendence and the profane world of the poet. But this distance is simultaneously collapsed as the poet enters a frank conversation with the ‘Great God’.

Although it is tempting to decode what the poet implies by the expression ‘Great God’, the study is not interested in the semantics of Mattera’s language and will not pursue such a line of analysis. Of interest here is to make sense of the poet’s candid reference to the Divine. The reference is direct without being explicit. In other words, Mattera’s poetic language, even though explicit in his address to the Divine, is not confessional and thus conceals his religious affiliation. This is, notwithstanding the fact that the God that the poet is invoking is framed in anthropocentric terms, as reflected in the refrain: ‘what cosmic tension throbs in your restless

brain'. Elsewhere in the same poem, especially in the concluding stanzas, the poet, as if in cordial conversation declares with the Divine, declares:

If only we could meet
In the ghetto or the street
You stripped of the power of death
I of its fear,
I'd go away from you
And you would cry to have me back
Perhaps I shall return to wipe your eyes
For we cannot have a God that cries. (Mattera 2007 [1983]: 19).

The above poem is referred to in order to illustrate the thrust of the argument thus far. First, undoubtedly, this poem can be read in many different ways. Nevertheless, in line with my reading, it is argued that the poem once more illustrates an instance of the complex yet familiar existentialist dimensions in Mattera's poetry. In this case, read in full, the poem captures human vulnerability, dread or, in the poet's expression, 'fear of death' and is hence less triumphalist. All of this is expressed through the ever-lurking theme of transcendence, even in this candid conversation with God. But the poem is also full of humour. Observe how the poet promises to 'return to wipe' God's 'eyes', for, after all, 'we could not have a God that cries'.

To return to Hutch's notion of implicit religion, I argue that this poem and many like it in Mattera's work qualify as 'implicit religiosity'. Put differently, a case can be made that transcendence, which in this instance refers to the beyond, represents one of the underlying subtexts in the texture and quality of Mattera's poetry. Even with reference to poems like 'Sea and Sand', when read as more than just verses of protest and crude politics, transcendence in the existential and horizontal sense is discernible. And here transcendence is referred to in a double sense: to connote both transcendence as referring to the beyond and transcendence in the everyday sense of capturing human relations.

With 'Sea and Sand', while the poet mediates the tension of loss or dispossession, he does so without dismissing the humanity of the oppressor. Inasmuch as the poet laments the loss of land through white occupation, he implores 'Black children' not to lose love 'for the White children whose fathers stole the land'. It is in this teleological vision and optimism that compels one to also foreground hope as one of the sub-themes in Mattera's poetry. Put differently, this is not just a fatalistic poetry but also a poetry of hope. Could this therefore be read as a transcendent impulse in Mattera's poetic vision? To look beyond merely the dialectic between suffering and hope, and hate and love, does this dialectic or doubling not signify another pertinent feature of Mattera's poetic utterances – that is, the deployment of dialectical metaphors? To remember against forgetting? To protest yet display empathy for the oppressive other? Deploying these dialectic metaphors or a doubling strategy to transcend, as it were, the poet's 'embodied experience', where his humanity, as some of his poems indicate, has been trampled. Yet is the poet still yearning to reach out to the humanity of his tormentors, including their progeny? On the other hand, could this be simply a reflection of the 'didactic element' that a critic like Alvarez-Pereyre has already denoted in Mattera's poetry? For example, Alvarez-Pereyre has observed that even though 'the political import' of some of Mattera's poems cannot be dismissed, and 'points to a growing didacticism on the part of Mattera', he cannot be blamed for that: 'For Don Mattera is no politician suddenly turned to literature, nor a prose-writer converted to verse.' Rather, Mattera has 'a genuine urge to write poetry' not just limited to themes 'pressed on him by 'the situation' but transcends the political context (Alvarez-Pereyre 1984: 202).

What about the tension between self and society that most of Mattera's critics have hardly addressed? Certainly, tensions and seeming contradictions are present through most of Mattera's poetry. A better way of addressing these apparent contradictions is not to see them as contradictions but as complementary contradictions. The contradictions reinforce the

assertion made in this chapter that an appreciation of Mattera's complexity as a poet emerges not from reading his poems in isolation but intertextually. It is in the intertextual and existentialist sense that I argue it is then possible to reconcile the temporal with the transcendental twist in Mattera's poetry.

The usage of transcendence in this chapter is in the specific context of reading Mattera's poetry. Accordingly, I use the term in a double sense to describe as well as analyse how the existential and everyday human existence in the poet's desire to reach out to the humanity of the 'Other' is captured in his poetry. In this sense, reference to transcendence identifies the poet's search to find an inclusive humanity that transcends all forms of barriers, including racial divides in the poems discussed.

Concluding Remarks

Without dismissing the prevailing descriptions and categorisations of Mattera's poetry, the concern in this chapter was to find a mode of reading that examines Mattera's poetry more comprehensively than is currently the case among his critics. In particular, the chapter has probed whether it is possible to read Don Mattera across time and locale. In other words, can Mattera's poetry be read beyond its immediate context and history: a reading that would confer a status to Mattera's poetry that challenges the epistemic closure that the rhetoric of 'protest poetry' entrenches? With this aim in view, the chapter has proceeded through a critical engagement with some of Mattera's critics and sought to challenge what is described here as a narrow and limited reading of his poetry. In particular, the strategy adopted in the chapter was to read Mattera against and through himself, that is, 'intertextually'. Following this intertextual reading, the chapter has sought to illustrate that even in instances where a tension between the poet's immediate experience is discernible in his poetry, when such poems are

read within the context of the poet's greater poetic milieu, or 'larger poetic context', to use Nwuneli's expression, a more comprehensive reading of Mattera's poetry begins to emerge.

In reading Mattera's poetry, while reference was also to his other anthologies such as *Inside the Heart of Love* and *The Moon is Asleep*, I started with *Azanian Love Song* as a deliberate hermeneutic ploy. This was to expose the limitations in its previous treatment but also to signal the continuities with Mattera's later works. The chapter has shown while political themes are present in both his early and later work, his poetry is complex and extends beyond politics and protest. My selection of the theme of compassion and transcendence was not arbitrary but based on how these themes resonate in various disguises through most of Mattera's poetic utterances and collections. This has prompted the assertion made in this chapter that Mattera, as a poet is more than just 'a bard of liberation', as he has been characterised before. In addition to the bard of liberation, the description that he is 'a poet of compassion' remains apt and endorses Mattera's complex vision as a poet. Arguably, this complexity of vision can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Here complex vision implies a dialectic that is at once specific and hence speaks to the poet's sense of place and location; in another sense, it refers to Mattera's poetic vision that is at once universal and transcends the immediacy of context. It is in this instance that this chapter refers to both transcendence and compassion, advancing, as it were, Killian's thin observation, and Lucille Davie's characterisation of Mattera as a poet of compassion. The current study extends this idea of 'a compassionate poet' to argue that compassion and transcendence represent one of the signatures or leitmotifs of Mattera's poetic vision. The themes of protest and struggle are balanced by other themes that transcend such mundane themes.

To avoid a reductionist reading of Mattera, the creative writer and poet, Chapter Five devotes attention to Mattera's fiction. The focus is mainly on his collection of short stories,

namely *The Storyteller*, with a view to ascertain the extent to which the argument and reading advanced in the current chapter is sustainable.

CHAPTER FIVE

ON MATTERA'S FICTION: DECENTRING THE 'PROTEST ETHOS'

The greatest challenge of the South African revolution is in the search for ways of thinking [...] that will help to break down the closed epistemological structures of South African oppression [...]. For writers this means freeing the creative process. (Ndebele 2006 [1991]: 63).

By using words to invent characters, dialogue and plot, the imaginative writer can challenge traditional views as well as offer prophetic insights into human life. (Okolo 2007:13)

Introduction: An Approach to Mattera's Short Stories

Any responsible reading of South African literary works cannot avoid some comment on the debate over the meaning and role of literature in society; and it is not surprising that lately, reflections on South African writing have focused a great deal on this debate (see Chapman & Lenta 2011; Bell & Jacobs 2009: 1–2; Atwell 2005; Cooper 2006: 91–93; Brutus 2006: 200–205). Although addressed by a number of South African literary critics (and active authors), the question on the meaning of literature in society is captured in an essay written by the South African literary critic, author and academic Njabulo Ndebele. Blaming what he terms the 'protest ethos', Ndebele calls for a need 'to free' creative writing and the South African 'social imagination' from the block caused by apartheid. Accordingly, although 'political emancipation' was necessary, as Ndebele argues, the 'greatest challenge of the South African revolution' rests in the 'search for ways of thinking, ways of perception, that will help to break down the closed epistemological structures of South African oppression' (2006: 63).

Ndebele's lament regarding freeing the creative imagination is not limited to the South African context. Mukoma Wa Ngugi has expressed similar concerns with regard to African literature in general in an article titled 'African literature must embrace wider horizons' (2013). For Mukoma Wa Ngugi, if African literature is to circumvent what he terms 'the aesthetic of prison',⁶⁴ then African writers must free their imagination from an aesthetic that places a premium on the rhetoric of suffering and resistance.

The reference to some of the debate on the meaning and role of literature in changing contexts is not with the view to overburden this Chapter with theoretical questions over what is sound, and relevant literature against what is not. Rather, the aim is to set the context for the approach pursued in this chapter with a view to find an enabling reading of Mattera's fiction as represented in his short stories in *The Storyteller* (1991[1989]). The angst discernible in the remarks by Ndebele reflect a failure to appreciate some of the complexity apparent even in the writing that is said to have overt political commitments. The challenge in reading such literature is not to dismiss such kinds of writing as suffering from the pathology of struggle, as Njabulo Ndebele and Mukoma Wa Ngugi allege. On the contrary, it requires patient reading that takes trouble to plough through such writings in order to distil some of their salient aspects beyond merely a simplistic gauging of whether they meet the aesthetic demands of sound literature. In this regard, Brenda Cooper's cautionary note on the same debate, albeit from a slightly different angle, is particularly helpful.

⁶⁴ Mukoma Wa Ngugi's remarks, although based on a critique of the standards used to award literary prizes, such as the Caine literary award for best African literature, are nevertheless still critical of African literature's pre-occupation with what he views to be an outdated aesthetic of suffering. For a detailed discussion, see Mukoma Wa Ngugi's article, *The Sunday Independent*, p. 18, December 1, 2013.

Cooper has broached the need to free the creative imagination (in South African and African literature) with great caution. Probing research imperatives in the arena of ‘arts and culture’, Cooper mediates the plea to escape the tyranny of the aesthetics of resistance through a sobering acknowledgement that such an effort is not based on merely eschewing one aesthetic for another deemed less political. She argues that inasmuch as ‘the magic of art and literature cannot be easily contained or described’, to make necessary adjustments demands a recognition ‘that research into arts and culture’, and, by inference, *writing* new literature, remains ‘a complex’ undertaking (Cooper 2006: 91–93). For Cooper, therefore, the question of aesthetics cannot be divorced from the very politics of writing in foreign languages other than those languages spoken by the writers. Put differently, the question of aesthetics must first be directed at the hegemony of an unquestioned aesthetic that is ‘embedded in the Western cultural archive’ of which the English language and the literature it has spurned is a part (Cooper 2006: 85; see also Cooper 2008: 1).

Cooper’s cautionary remarks help to put into perspective the taken-for-granted reading of Mattera’s creative output through lenses of a narrowly defined aesthetic evaluation. Such an evaluation has conscripted Mattera’s writing, as shown in Chapter Four, to the rubric of protest literature or what Ndebele has described as literature plagued by the ‘protest ethos’ (2006: 63). By focusing on Mattera’s fiction, this chapter takes further some of the argument advanced in Chapter Four. The aim, however, is not to push for a neat and valorising reading of Mattera’s fiction. Rather, besides gauging whether some of the argument advanced in Chapter Four is sustainable, the aim is to gauge what happens when Mattera’s poetry is read against his short stories. Does his fiction, for instance, reflect any discontinuities with his poetic output and vision? And if so, what would those discontinuities or even continuities, entail?

Of course, part of the difficulty with reading Don Mattera's work more holistically is that, as remarked before, much of Mattera's fiction has hardly received any serious academic attention beyond comments on his early poetry. Although first published in 1989, *The Storyteller* has received little attention. If at all, the stories in the collection are often treated in isolation from each other. The stories are lifted from the collection as either part of anthologies dealing with 'short stories'⁶⁵ in South African literature or as is the case with Adhikari, to lend credibility to socio-political commentaries on the 'racial stereotyping' of Coloured identity (2006:13). Alternatively, as Manus has done in her *Emerging Traditions: Towards a Postcolonial Stylistics of Black South African Fiction in English* (2011), one story from the entire collection is selected, and then treated as a specific 'case study' to illustrate Mattera's 'stylistics' in comparison with other black writers of fiction.

It might be useful, therefore, to begin the chapter by enquiring what kind of writer Mattera is as a storyteller. Is Mattera the storyteller, for instance, different from Mattera the poet? Or, is the line between poet and storyteller rather blurred? An indirect reference to Walter Benjamin's observation on the Russian writer Nikolai Leskov here might help to situate these questions. In an essay interestingly titled 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov', Benjamin observes rather wryly, by citing Tolstoy, who had observed why a writer like 'Dostoevsky is so widely read', yet Leskov who in Tolstoy's view was a more accomplished writer than Dostoevsky was hardly read (Tolstoy quoted in Benjamin 1969: 92).

⁶⁵ See Don Mattera's 'Die Bushie is Dood'. In *Being Here: Modern Short Stories from Southern Africa*. Edited by Robin Malan (Cape Town: David Philip, 1994), pp. 138 – 142. See also, Don Mattera's 'Afrika Road'. In *Under the African Skies: Modern African Stories*. Edited by Garson Laron (New York: MacMillan, 1997), pp. 222 - 227.

After several rereadings of Don Mattera's collection of short stories, which is also named *The Storyteller*, a similar conclusion to the one by Tolstoy and Benjamin with regard to Leskov was drawn: why is Don Mattera's fiction not as widely read as his poetry in *Azanian Love Song*? In addition to poetry, Mattera has written both short plays and short stories. Mattera's choice of medium for his creative writing is also reflective of his stance as a writer and author. The distinction that Benjamin makes between what distinguishes 'storytelling' from the novel is particularly instructive for situating Mattera as a writer of fiction who selects the medium of the short story. Compared with the novelist who is viewed as 'isolated' and hence 'the novel' is the product of the 'solitary individual', the short story is different (1969: 87). Conversely, according to Benjamin 'the story teller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others' (1969: 92).

Without drawing a sharp wedge between the novel and the short story as a distinct genre, Don Mattera's skill as a storyteller is discernible in most of the eight stories that constitute his collection. To read the short stories, the reading strategy used in the preceding chapter, that is, an intertextual reading of Mattera or reading the latter against himself is still followed. In the specific context of this chapter, the usage of 'intertextuality' in addition to reading Mattera against the backdrop of the previous chapter, which focused on his poetry, would include an intra-textual reading of the stories against each other. Also, to a limited extent, reference to some of his contemporaries like Bessie Head and Es'kia Mphahlele, who have also used the genre of the short story, shall be made.

The Short Stories: Context and Content

On first reading Mattera's short stories, the narrative appears a bit simple and plain. This simple style finds resonance in Bessie Head's short stories that Femi Ojo-Ade has characterised as

‘simple, down-to-earth’ and which enable readers to relate to ‘its characters with ease’ (Ojo-Ade 1990: 79–92). The deceptively simple yet textured narrative in Mattera’s stories masks the hidden layers through which the eight short stories contained in *The Storyteller* can be read. Mattera’s ability to cover multiple themes in a simple yet passionate style not only marks his signature as a writer but also unmask his ability to capture the odd existential settings that surround his characters. Accordingly, it would not be an exaggeration to stake a claim that a critical reading of *The Storyteller* lends itself to a kind of ‘proto-existentialist’ reading. Thus, in addition to its description as a ‘document of past injustices and future hope’, Mattera’s collection of short stories contains all the familiar existential themes of anguish, alienation and a people’s quest for freedom. For example, critics like Garson Larson while praising Mattera as ‘a writer’s writer’ has opined that his stories ‘scream out in the darkness against the horrors of life in apartheid South Africa’ (1997). Larson’s description of *The Storyteller* makes it difficult to ignore the political context as well as Mattera’s own positionality in his work.

‘Positionality’ in the context of creative writing and literary theory refers, as Helgesson points out, ‘to the writing subject’s intersection with society and the public domain.’ Accordingly, the writer cannot be excluded from ‘the worldliness of a particular text’. Because of this imperative, Helgesson finds it difficult to accord or privilege a reading that accords attention to the ‘private realm’ outside the ontology of the text, and notes that ‘the “private realm” is consequently a less appropriate object [...] to pursue’ (Helgesson 2004: 23). Helgesson’s stance is premised on a particular reading of literature, that is, one that valorises the ontology of the text and which is inattentive to the authorial subject. To circumvent this problem, this chapter opts for an existentialist reading of *The Storyteller* that pays attention to the paradoxes and awkward relations that surround the world of Mattera’s characters. This strikes a balance between the excessive valorisation of the authorial subject against the other extreme based on an unlimited ontology of the text. Accordingly, the chapter’s interpretive

strategy is to read Mattera's stories against their conventional reading where they are presented as stories of protest and unable to escape their political context. To pursue this reading against the usual convention, I draw on paradox not just as a literary device to highlight inherent contradictions but also to interpret how Mattera's usage of paradox enables his characters to escape the burden of a politically saturated universe in quest of transcendence.

Although my reference to paradox is drawn from an observation of the universe of Mattera's characters in their day to day interactions, I am indebted for the interpretive insight on transcendence in fiction from reading Regina Schwartz's essay '*Othello* and the Horizon of Justice' (2004: 81 – 104). In her interpretation of *Othello*, Schwartz poses the question of whether the play is premised on the quest 'the possibility of redemption' in death; or is it based on a 'craving for justice'? Hence, it 'incites [the] transcendent' (2004: 81 - 98). Schwartz qualifies this transcendent quest in the play as 'horizontal' rather than 'vertical' transcendence. Schwartz's notion of horizontal transcendence can be applied to the stories in *The Storyteller*. Even though most of the stories in the collection are based on the everyday life and exigencies of an apartheid society, they do not preclude transcending the overt political context surrounding them. To illustrate this assertion, reference shall be made to a sample of stories. For those stories that will not be analysed at length, a summary will be given of what they entail as a means of guarding against a selective sample of the stories.

The collection consists of eight stories, namely 'Execution', 'Oggzee', 'Uniform', 'Child of Ghamt-Ghareb', 'Die Bushie is Dood', 'Death Can Follow a Man', 'The Storyteller' and 'Afrika Road'. The stories cover a diverse range of themes and sub-themes. The themes that stood out are those that could easily be categorised as themes of anguish, hope, love, death, alienation and sense of redemption. These identifiable themes are crafted in narratives that echo

a subtext that paradoxically have resonances of compassion in what are ostensibly political stories.

Among the stories, 'Die Bushie is Dood', 'Child of Ghamt-Ghareb' and 'The Storyteller', are distinctly premised on the contradiction that saddles coloured identity in South Africa, and as such, touch on the familiar theme of racial tensions as Zoe Wicomb (1998) and Robin Malan (1994: 138 – 42) have observed. For example, anyone familiar with South African history cannot miss the context of 'Die Bushie as Dood' ('The Bushman is Dead'), where 'Bushie' is a play on 'Boesman', a pejorative term used in apartheid terminology to refer to those classified as coloured. The story takes as its background the ugly moments of the 1980s and early 1990s, and the overriding theme is what at the time was described as 'black on black violence'. Ironically, the fallen victim in this story, 'Johnny Jacobs', is a student activist who happens to be 'coloured' and who finds himself on the wrong side of town, Soweto. Told with chilling account, the story represents the tragic lives of political activists who, owing to belonging to different political organisations or, in this instance, different racial groups, fell victim to the political violence of the times. Hence Johnny Jacobs' bewilderment: 'Why me? Why me? [...] why did they have to attack me of all people? Am I also not in the struggle?' (Mattera 1991). This story relives not only the heated moments of the 1980s but also the distrust that characterised inter-racial relations. Johnny's mum had warned her son before his fateful end, which is told in a language that makes one empathise with the main character. As noted earlier in this Chapter, this story has received some critical treatment in a few works (literary and non-literary) whose focus is either on the theme of 'racial tensions' between Africans and Coloureds or focus on racial stereotyping and marginalisation of Coloured identity.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ See Mohamed Adhikari's, "'God Made the White Man, God Made the Black Man": Popular Racial

‘Child of Ghamt-Ghareb’ and ‘The Storyteller’ continues the theme of coloured identity but from the vantage of a San and Khoi sense of displacement. For example, ‘The Storyteller’ revolves around the character ‘Oom Gaap’, who is described as ‘the diminutive shepherd’, was one of ‘the last of the oral poets of his people’, and, *is* ‘the Storyteller’. The style is based on a historical narrative and it is due largely to this that the collection has been described as ‘a historical document’. It is not surprising that the author dedicates the book ‘to the San and Khoikhoi people of Africa’ and to his ‘friends in Sweden’, a country, as he notes, that provided him ‘a brief sense of freedom and human dignity’ in the ‘six months’ that he spent there.

Then there is ‘The Uniform’, which is replete with paradox and contradictions that defined relationships during the Apartheid era. Told through the context of South African realities and a mockery of Afrikaner bureaucracy in its quest to safeguard the interest of the ‘Volk’ (Nation). In ‘The Uniform’, those considered ‘friend and foe’ are specified. For uniforms are not only the symbol of the status quo that set friend and enemy apart. The ‘uniform’ defined Afrikaner masculinity, or, what the narrative voice refers to as what ‘made a boy become a man. *Finish and klaar!*’ The use of the Afrikaans ‘klaar’ for emphasis connotes arrogance and unmediated authority and power. Significantly, ‘The Uniform’, besides highlighting inter-racial contradictions, also, hints, at the internal contradictions within the volk itself. Furthermore, the story provides an instance where religion is not only mobilised to humanise Mattera’s characters, also, it highlights what I describe as the paradox of Afrikaner religious sensibilities. Take the police officer who in solace exclaims ‘Here Gott’, invoking

Stereotyping of Coloured People in apartheid South Africa’, *South African Historical Journal*, 55, (2006), p. 13.

God as an instance of thanks giving to the Afrikaner masculine God that has saved him ‘during an attack in the township.’

By paradox in the context of this story, I refer to the lopsided religiosity of the Afrikaner police officer who remains insensitive to the plight of the native. The Afrikaner police officer boasts about how many black kids he has shot, despite the fact that he is also a father, and husband. The officer is completely oblivious to the possibility that the maid who works for him as ‘baas’(boss) and ‘miesies’ (madam) could easily be the mother of the child that was shot in the streets during the police raids. Contrasted with the ‘maid’, she remains caring and compassionate towards her master, notwithstanding his active role as a police officer.

In ‘Death Follows a Man’ is a story whose background is what historians have described as frontier encounters between the ‘settlers’ and ‘natives’ characterised by endless conflict and interracial tensions. The paradox in this story is that the tensions and conflicts are also marked by instances where human barriers are collapsed. The main protagonist in the story is the farmer Van Tonder, who, in the midst of asymmetrical racial servant–master relationships, develops a close friendship with the old Xhosa servant Xipu. Xipu is painted as a paragon of wisdom, understanding and compassion. Always, it is ‘the old man’ Xipu who comes to rescue and comforts his master. The story also resonates with themes of love and death, especially love across the racial line. It begins with an encounter at the burial of Van Tonder’s deceased wife, Sarel.

Told in a mournful tone, the narrative speaks of ‘two forlorn shadows’ when describing the meeting between Van Tonder and Xipu. In this scene they are meeting as ordinary humans, as the ‘old man addressed him in Xhosa which Van Tonder understood and spoke fluently’. All of a ‘sudden [...] brief warmth showed in the white man’s face’ – for inasmuch as Van Tonder, readers are told, was ‘unmoved by the many handshakes of compassion [...] and the

soft pats on his back and shoulders [...] He needed nobody's compassion, let alone pity.' Earlier, Van Tonder had 'moved away to rest his head against a barren and lifeless tree' away from the crowd when the grave was covered. Yet, when Xipu approached to offer his condolences, Van Tonder was more than willing to embrace Xipu's comforting words, as Xipu was one of the few people for Van Tonder 'whose compassion he could accept and trust' (Mattera 1991[1989: 85). After all, Xipu was someone who had earned Van Tonder's love and respect 'since childhood' that transcended racial barriers. Xipu would later come to save Van Tonder from committing suicide over the loss of his wife by addressing him as follows: 'my son, don't jump [...] this is not the way. Your life is too precious' (Mattera 1991[1989:89). Xipu's address to Van Tonder in the story as 'my son' is instructive. It alludes to their closeness and mutual respect. After gaining some composure when addressed by Xipu, Van Tonder retorts 'I am fine now Tata [...]. Twice you have rescued me. Once as a child, you pulled me from the burning house, which took my parents, my brothers and sisters. And now again.' (Mattera 1991 [1989]: 90). Van Tonder's deferring reply in referring to the old man, as 'Tata' ('my father in Xhosa) is equally revealing. The characters are deracialised, and, roles of servant and master are collapsed. Both characters interact as father and son and thus though depicting the reality of apartheid, they are able to find inter-human transcendence within an abnormal society.

Turning to 'Execution', this story is among the collection's most intense stories and hence I analyse it at length. It revolves around a young man who is a university graduate and part of the underground movement. The agenda is to reclaim their country from 'the usurpers' who staged a successful 'coup against our government'. The context and time of this story is left to the imagination. However, it is through the portrayal of its protagonists that a fuller picture of whom the different players and contending forces are is established. The coup is described as being 'masterminded' not only 'by several highly placed civilians' but also, as the

narrative voice singles out, by ‘the clergy’. These clergy had ‘sowed the seeds of the revolt’ against the peoples’ government ‘from their pulpits’. Within weeks, ‘a republic in the name of some religion –Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam – call it what you will’ is declared (Mattera 1991[1989]: 7). Through the story, it is the forces of ‘God’ or the people of the Church, which includes the narrator’s own father, who are set against the forces of ‘evil and the decadent government of the atheist’. On the other pole are those fighting in the name of freedom and justice. It is against this background that the protagonist finds himself facing execution. The ‘execution’ of the main character can be seized as the hermeneutical moment to unravel the complexity of the story, which, though political, is full of paradox. Caught between fear and courage, the protagonist smiles as he faces his executors and meets his death sentence ‘in front of a firing squad [...] without the traditional blindfold’. In the scuffles that ensue, the protagonist manages to escape through a ‘rescue mission’ that ends in disaster and his recapturing. At this moment, one of the capturers invokes ‘compassion’ with the admonition: ‘we must at all times show compassion and concern towards our citizens’; after all, ‘the Church is the state and the state, the Church’ (Mattera 1991 [1989:14–15). But the kind of compassion invoked here is the victor’s compassion. This compels the soon-to-be executed to refuse prayers by the official priest, for the captured refuses to succumb and ‘be prayed over like a kosher offering’. It is this resilience in such a moment of vulnerability and weakness, readers are informed that the power of the ‘silent rejection of’ the victor’s ‘compassion and his god’ leaves the capturers ‘dejected’ (Mattera 1991[1989]: 15).

This play on compassion is re-enacted elsewhere in the story, especially toward the end, through language that collapses the binary between ‘the executioner and the victim’. The narrator insists in the end that both ‘the executioner and the victim are one’. This realisation

comes just before the final moments of the execution when the characters' eyes meet:

Our eyes widen once more – waiting for the final acknowledgement. He blinks twice. Slow and full of empathy –opening and closing both eyes. He locks his stern jaws and looks away. The compassion I receive from the act warms me and pacifies my fear. The coldness vanishes. My strength is renewed and increased. (Mattera 1991[1989]:20)

It is during this intense moment, just seconds between life and death, that the humanity of the victim somehow feels a sense of oneness with the 'executioner'. In this display of human empathy, the victim reaches out and finds warmth from 'the compassion I receive for the act', illustrating the ability to transcend and hence collapse the binary between the two. What 'act' is the victim referring to? The human act of kindness no longer matters whether it is the executioner's compassion; for a moment – and awkward as it is, transcendence is achieved. At once, all become human. That is, even after this fleeting experience of inter-human transcendence, the victim is still awaiting 'the unknown' or moment of his execution. It is the final moment that he will nevertheless face with readiness, 'beaming with a smile' and 'ready' to meet his fate (Mattera 1991 [1989]: 20 -21).

At once, a satire of institutional religion and church, the complicity of its officials is exposed. Note the statement 'the Church is the State, and the State, the Church'. Hence, the 'clergy' are blamed of planting the 'seeds of the revolt'. The narrative is interestingly raceless. This begs the question of whether this is not the writer's strategy: to paint the story and its characters not through racial markers but as being simply human? Nevertheless, to push this line of questioning is again to assume that the story is about South Africa when its context could easily be another country. In the latter sense, it could be describing a post-independent African country and not South Africa, which at the time of writing was still under bondage.

One of the devices that Don Mattera uses to great effect in some of the stories is that of colloquial expressions or township patois known as 'Tsotsitaal'. This is vintage Mattera,

digging deep into the vocabulary of a world of which he was once a part. One such story that employs this device is ‘Oggzee’, which represents one of the lighter stories in the collection. Of Mattera’s short stories, this is one story that has received detailed attention in a study by Vicki Briault Manus’s study, *Toward a Postcolonial Stylistics of black South African fiction in English*. Manus’s interest in Oggzee is focussed on ‘the variety of Tsotsitaal spoken in Sophiatown’. For her the story is useful insofar as it represents a ‘case study’ to either illustrate how ‘indigenous authors “indigenize” their writing’; or, to show case ‘the variety of Tsotsitaal spoken in Sophiatown’ (Manus 2011: 190 – 193).⁶⁷ Besides downplaying racial tensions by capturing the cosmopolitan and free mixing in Sophiatown across racial lines, the story also debunks the folly of reading Mattera’s fiction through the lenses of politics and resistance. I agree with Manus’s depiction of the story as ‘emblematic of Sophiatown’, its mysteries and contradictions. Ordinary life in Sophiatown is depicted in the larger than life character named *Oggzee* who captures times of a bygone era. The story reflects the day-to-day relationships among peers and is ‘replete with Tsotsitaal’ (Manus 2011: 190). Mattera portrays *Oggzee*, the main character of the story, as a jovial and fun-loving. In short, he is the typical clown and is a know-it-all character:

He sang at weddings and at funeral wakes and became a hot favorite among the girls. One of them bore his three children but vanished soon after the removals of Sophiatown. Oggzee was a film fundi and could recite lines from Laurence Oliver’s *Hamlet* which we saw several times over Odin Bioscope [...] ‘Kakprater’ – howler – was one of the names he acquired on account of his ability to relate anecdotes [...] and jokes of the side-splitting variety, which had most of the guys rolling in the mud and slime of Kofifi-Sophia [...]. (Mattera 1991[1989]: 21).

⁶⁷ For an additional comment on Vicki Brault Manus’s work, see Michael Chapman’s Review of ‘Emerging Traditions: Towards a Postcolonial Stylistics of Black South African Fiction in English’. *Research in African Literatures*, 42(4), 2011, pp.152 – 153. Available: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/454524> .[2017, November 15].

One of the light-hearted moments in this story is where Oggzee is teased ‘about his age’ by ‘the Black One’ or ‘Umnyamane’: ‘You folks were so poor that all they left was old age.’ With sharp wit, Oggzee’s response is equally taunting: ‘You are so Black that when [...] asked for your birth certificate, [you] brought a wheelbarrow full of coal.’ (Mattera 1991 [1989]:21 - 27). This playful conversation among the characters signifies the jeering and light mood of this story. Oggzee is about everyday relationships and is full of humour. There is a nostalgic ring to the story, with the unmistakable subtext of an autobiographical whisper reminiscing about ‘Kofifi’, as Sophiatown was fondly called by the locals. While politics and race are in the background, otherness is handled through humour and with a self-deprecating tone among friends who laugh at the contradictions of life as it confronts them in their everyday lives.

The final story to be reviewed, ‘Afrika Road’ is reminiscent of Ben Okri’s novel, *The Famished Road* that was first conceived as a series of short stories.⁶⁸ This is not to say Mattera’s collection of short stories is identical in content with Ben Okri’s work. However, in the metaphor of the ‘road’, which assumes prominence in both works, there is a striking resemblance. As ‘Afrika Road’ in Mattera’s story, the road is given life and ontological status. It is the living witness and assumes the role of the mythical narrator. Here the real and mythical collide as the voice of Afrika Road narrates the story of past struggles including ‘the war against apartheid’. The narration recalls injustices of a distant past but also refers to the turmoil of the not so distant past, the 1980s. The reference to the latter, is given in the final paragraph, where the story is narrated by invoking the extreme political acts of the times: ‘someone rolled a tyre.

⁶⁸ See Ben Okri, ‘The Famished Road was written to give myself reasons to live’. Guardian, 15 March 2016. Available: www.the-guardian.com/books/2016/mar/15/ben-okri-the-famished-road-was-written-to-give-myself-reasons-to-live. [2017 November 15).

Someone lifted a petrol can. Someone struck a match on Afrika Road [...].’ This is a clear reference to the act of ‘necklacing’ where those considered agents of the apartheid regime were often set alight by putting a tyre on their necks.⁶⁹

But the simplistic narrative is interspersed with mythical and poetic utterances that encapsulate the paradox of the period: ‘I, Afrika Road, know and have endured the weight and pressure of all sorts of moving objects: human, animal, and mechanical’. This kind of narration is juxtaposed with other narrations where the narrator relishes the sight of seeing ‘humour’ with ‘anger marching side by side’. She smiles on other occasions while watching ‘weddings and child births’ and fascinated by ‘glimpses of gaiety on the people’s faces.’ And yet, the ‘schoolchildren in khaki uniforms’ continue to ‘raise their wooden guns at the law enforcers on the hill’ with ‘bullets made of hot breath’ (Mattera 1991 [1989]: 123). There is an uncanny resonance in these interjections with some of the poems in *Azanian Love Song*. In fact, the tone of the poem ‘I am infinite’ could be easily fused within the narrative of this story. Consider the following stanzas:

I am
The tortured
Unavenged
Lover
Unloved
Dying
For a burial ground
To tell
The hour of my deliverance

I am Afrika

⁶⁹ For details on the ‘necklace’ and its history as a form of political punishment, see Joanna Ball’s report, March 1994, and written for the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVr), *The Ritual of the Necklace*. Available: www.csvr.org.za/publications/1632-the-ritual-of-the-necklace.html. [2017, June 24].

Infinite
Indestructible. (Mattera 2007[1983]: 81)

Read this poem against the following passage from ‘Afrika Road’ and note the similarities: ‘And I, Afrika Road, have seen them rise and then run undaunted against the ill wind; falling but emerging anew through sheaves of resisting corn – giving the earth life that genuine life might be reborn [...]’ (Mattera 1991[1989]:123). This passage is open to many readings. It evokes at once the immediate realities of the turmoil and trauma experienced by ‘Afrika Road.’ Also, it registers the narrator’s optimism that such turmoil can be transcended and that a better universe where ‘genuine life will be reborn’, is still possible.

Analysis and an Interpretation: Religiosity and Transcendence embedded in the Political

Although Don Mattera’s different stories in *The Storyteller* vary in their emphasis, style of presentation and themes, there is a distinctive pattern and a set of enduring motifs. Similar to other works, such as the well-studied Es’kia Mphahlele’s short stories, the background to most of Mattera’s short stories is unmistakably that of apartheid South Africa and its politics. It is with this ‘apartheid in the background’ in the case of Mphahlele’s work that Rafapa struggles to find what he regards as ‘the representations of African humanism’ (Rafapa 2010: 132 – 146; see also, Watts 1989: 57 - 105). Without dismissing the ‘apartheid milieu and atmosphere’ that surrounds ‘the [...] protagonist’ in Mphahlele’s fiction (2010: 131), a weakness he admits, where the lives of the people in the stories are overtaken by ‘the political pressure over them’, I find this kind of aesthetic evaluation within black and African literature problematic. Besides the question of the stereotype of a literature defined by struggle and protest, the other problem is that such an aesthetic evaluation fails to account for the possibility of transcending the tyranny of the political in black and African literature. Even Rafapa’s reading of Mphahlele,

although it does acknowledge ‘sustained representation of Christian practices as appropriated by Zionist sects by the characters in Mphahlele’s work’, his reading does not venture to explore the implications of the identified religious dimension in Mphahlele’s fiction (Rafapa 2010: 132). Likewise, Okolo’s *African Literature as Political Philosophy* does the same with regard to the works of Chinua Achebe and Ngugi Wa Thiongo. Okolo could only interpret these writers as exclusively ‘political thinkers’ and thus the implication that as ‘imaginative writers’, they can only be interpreted as political philosophers (Okolo 2007: 33 - 37).

To avoid imposing such a limited aesthetic evaluation to Don Mattera’s short stories, the chapter has opted for a thematic approach and therefore, although the political is acknowledged, has put emphasis elsewhere. The interest here was to interpret the significance or meaning of the persistent motifs that were identified as consistent themes in Mattera’s fiction. In the previous Chapter, it was argued that the one-dimensional reading of Mattera’s poetry in strictly political terms as verses of protest, robs his poetic oeuvre of its complex vision and transcendent character. That argument is extended to his collection of short stories. However, if the short stories are described as stubbornly political, then on what bases can the current Chapter extend the argument advanced in Chapter Four? In other words, in what sense and form does transcendence manifest itself in the context of the short stories. Does the seemingly political character of Mattera’s short stories not present a contradiction to the argument advanced to the reading of his poetry?

This Chapter is certainly not denying the political content and the ‘apartheid background’ that surrounds some of the stories in Mattera’s fiction. On the contrary, it affirms the facticity and anti-apartheid, anti-colonial posture, the quest for freedom and all the other familiar political tropes that are depicted in the short stories. It might be tempting to read *The Storyteller* like Larson’s has done, as political stories depicting a racial society (1997); or, read

them like Magubane who asserts that Mattera's fiction reflects the familiar world of Sophiatown as captured in his autobiography (Magubane 2009[1987]: ix)⁷⁰. This skewed aesthetic evaluation of Mattera's fiction by the aforementioned critics is highly problematic. The problem is that either it promotes an exclusively political reading, or, it fails to distinguish that while *Memory is the Weapon* is an autobiographical text, *The Storyteller* is fictional. Moreover, in stories like 'Afrika Road', 'Child of Ghamt-Garib' and 'Execution', to mention a few, the content and tone borders at times on the mythical and shifts between the present and remote past. As illustrated, the mystical 'I' of 'Afrika Road' is both the sole narrator as well as witness to the ugly and beautiful, sorrows and joys, life and death in her timeless existence.

In recognition of the different emphasis and complexity in *The Storyteller*, I argue demands a reading beyond the familiar political themes and privileged aesthetic of struggle. This reading beyond is what is identified in this chapter as the need to pay attention to the paradoxical instances around Mattera's characters and how they are depicted. My reference to paradox is thus in the descriptive as well as hermeneutical sense. By descriptive I underpin Mattera's effective deployment of paradox as a literary device to enhance the individual, social and political contradictions that confront his characters. Whereas in the hermeneutical sense I refer to the identified paradoxical instances as a means to interpret the recurring motifs of compassion and transcendence that also characterize his fiction.

The political background surrounding the stories does not deprive Mattera's imagination to endow his characters with the ability to transcend their political situation nor

⁷⁰ Magubane view finds support in Jane Watts assertion that most black writers from South Africa 'infiltrate' other genres 'with autobiographical material' more than writers from elsewhere. See Jane Watts, *Black Writers from South Africa: Towards a Discourse of Liberation* (Oxford: MacMillan, 1989), pp. 107 – 108.

matter the existing contradictions. To explore this assertion, I have drawn attention to how religiosity in Mattera's characters, for example, in 'Execution', 'The Uniform' and, 'Death follows a Man', is manifested in his fiction. The usage here of the term 'religiosity' and not 'religion' is deliberate. It draws attention to the fact that I do not claim that religion in Mattera's fiction as is the case with Mphahlele, receives sustained representation. For example, Rafapa as indicated, has observed how Mphahlele's characters are explicitly portrayed as believing subjects who belong to various African independent churches, and, in this way Mphahlele's fiction makes overt references to institutional religion, in this case Christianity and its presence in society. In Mattera with the exception of 'Execution' where there is a direct mention of different institutional religions, including Islam, religion as a distinct category does not receive such a strong representation. At least not in the sense that Mphahlele does. Or, with regard to Islam as captured in the work of someone like Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1962);⁷¹ nor as illustrated in Kenneth Harrow's, *Faces of Islam in African Literature* (1991) where Islam is prominent in the fiction of African writers like, Camara Laye, Ousmane Sembene, Mariam Ba, to mention a few. Conversely, the presence of religion or religiosity, not to mention Islam directly, in Mattera's short stories is rather embodied in the subjectivities and sensibilities of his characters. This religious dimension or religiosity though, is not straightforward; it is discernible in the paradoxes that characterize the universe of Mattera's characters in their inter-human interactions.

⁷¹ For example, in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's fiction the representation of Islam and explicit references to Islamic lexicon in expressions such 'prophet Mohamed', the Shahada or testimony of faith, 'holy book' and Islamic rituals serves as explicit background in the narration of the life of the aristocratic Diallobe family, Samba Diallo and Thierno – with the latter being the main characters. See Cheikh Hamidou Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure* (Johannesburg: Heinemann, 1962).

The discussion of 'The Execution' has drawn attention to what I have described as the paradox of compassion to capture the awkward instances where victim and victor, meet face to face. While initially refuting the 'compassion' of his would be executors, in the end the victim begrudgingly reciprocates by accepting to embrace 'the compassion' of his adversaries. It is in the context of this fleeting moment that victor and victim manage to find inter-human transcendence. Likewise, in 'Death Follows a Man', the relations between the world of whites and blacks are not symmetrical. However, in the specific case of the relationship between the two main protagonists, the old man Xipu and Van Tonder, is close. Hence, it is easy for Van Tonder to accept the native's compassion while he rejects that of his own white folks. Similarly, in 'The Uniform,' the nameless servant although fully aware of the complicity of her 'Baas' – the Afrikaner police in state violence against protesting black youth, she does not show any signs of enmity. Through her compassion, she has refused to be dehumanized by the political situation that wears everyone around her down.

Whereas the deviant spirit and bravery in the face of his adversaries in the protagonist in 'Execution' is explicit, Mattera has portrayed the characters of Xipu in 'Death follows a Man' and the nameless servant in 'The Uniform' as compassionate towards their superiors. It could be argued that the latter characters reflect the typical character described by Steve Biko of the meek native who though suffering and angry, masks his or her anger and 'bitterness' toward their superiors with wild smiles of meek kindness (Biko quoted in Watts 1989 :26). Mattera has left this question open. The narrative downplays the adversarial and asymmetrical relationships that characterize a racially divided society. Depicted as compassionate even though their political situation remains cruel, Mattera's black characters maintain a dignified sense of self and paradoxically, in this way, are able to embrace the humanity of the white other. Elsewhere Chabani Manganyi has described the ability of the black victim to embrace the humanity of their tormentors as a form of 'psychic liberation' and a form of strength

(Manganyi 1981: 170). In the case of Mattera's short stories, his creative imaginary reverses roles and inversely lifts the ordinarily subordinate with a superior moral authority that makes inter-human transcendence possible. In other words, the spiritual sensibility and religiosity of the black characters in the stories enable them to shower kindness and hence transcend apartheid divisions and subjectivities. In this way, Mattera's characters and protagonists are able to find transcendence and thus escape the burden of 'the political pressure' that Mphahlele thought was impossible for his characters to overcome.

Concluding Remarks

Beginning with an overview of all the stories in *The Storyteller*, this chapter has argued that a close reading of Mattera's short stories, like his poetry, contains as its subtext the recurring motifs of compassion and transcendence. In the context of the short stories, these recurring motifs are not direct; they appear in the paradoxical instances that characterize the universe of Mattera's characters. Inasmuch as the stories emerge in an undeniably political context, the paradox is that the stories also capture the fragile yet complex nature of human relations. In interpreting the paradoxical in human relations in what is otherwise a racially divided society, this Chapter has described such interactions as instances of inter-human transcendence. Mattera's achieves this not by downplaying the political but through foregrounding what I have interpreted as the paradox of compassion which enables Mattera's characters to escape the burden of their political situation.

Furthermore, in its analysis of Mattera's fiction, the Chapter has argued that even if *The Storyteller* is not explicitly religious fiction, religion is implicitly present through the religiosity embodied by his characters. This view is more explicit in 'Execution', 'Death-follows a Man' and the 'The Uniform' where there is a palpable religiosity that reflects the human side of

Mattera's characters. Notwithstanding the exceptional shows of heroism in 'Execution', Mattera's characters are depicted as fragile beings with a keen desire to escape or transcend apartheid divisions and alterities. What is instructive about Mattera's fiction is that though political in one sense, in another sense it surpasses the political through inter-human transcendence. Hence the conclusion that *The Storyteller* can also, be read through a hermeneutic and aesthetic evaluation that is open to notions of transcendence.

CHAPTER SIX

MATTERA IN CONVERSATION WITH MALCOLM X: DELINEATING CONTOURS OF AFRICANA/ISLAMICA EXISTENTIAL THOUGHT

Mattera's evolution from a gangster to a poet for the Black Consciousness Movement is one of the great stories of human potential, a story similar to that of Malcolm X in the United States. (Magubane 2009 [1987]: xxii)

To not study Malcom X, or to not talk about his life is to rob the world of its most powerful prophetic voices [...]. (Byrd and Miri 2016: 3)

Introduction: Why Read Mattera with Malcolm X?

This chapter differs from the previous ones, where the focus was mainly on Mattera and his work. Through a comparative bent, the chapter undertakes to read Mattera alongside Malcolm X. The purpose of reading these two figures together is not to push for a crude comparison but to provide a hermeneutic moment to critique, as well as examine the possibility of extending black/Africana existential thought beyond its conventional presentation as a philosophy born out of protest and thus forever trapped in an oppositional discourse (Gordon 2000; More 2012). Such a critique of black/Africana existential philosophy is not arrived at by accident. On the contrary, this view is consistent with the reading of Mattera that is found in the previous two chapters, where the study has challenged what it considers to be simplistic and banal readings of Mattera's poetry and fiction as mainly representing a 'literature of protest' and therefore limited to themes of protest only.

While the data in the previous chapters were based on Mattera's creative works (poetry and fiction), the difference with this chapter is that it takes as its data the embodied existential experience and discourses of Mattera and Malcolm X as a point of reference and hence worthy of a critical analysis. My reading of the two figures is that, inasmuch as they have been presented in most literature as subjects of protests, such an interpretation is regrettably limited. It does not account for what is considered resonances of transcendence that are evident in Mattera's and Malcolm X's discourses and visions. Before the latter assertion is further examined, it is worth asking why Mattera is being paired with Malcolm X? Are there no other figures besides Malcolm X that would warrant a close reading with Mattera? For that matter, could the Cape Town-born internationally renowned pianist Abdullah Ibrahim (formerly Dollar Brand) not be punted as an ideal candidate to read alongside Mattera? After all, not only are the two contemporaries but they also represent, in a sense, 'iconic'⁷² black South Africans who had turned to Islam more or less around the same time (the late 1960s and mid-1970s).⁷³ Undoubtedly, there could be valid reasons for reading the two together; but I find the South

⁷² While Mattera is a famed poet of note, Ibrahim is an acclaimed pianist with an international reputation. Incidentally, both have been awarded honorary doctoral degrees in recognition of their achievements by various universities, such as Wits. See for instance, University of Witwatersrand Alumni Relations Citations for 2009 Graduations. Available: <https://www.wits.ac.za/alumni/>. [2015, February 5].

⁷³ To be precise, Ibrahim converted in 1968 whereas Mattera turned to Islam a bit later around 1976. For more details on Ibrahim, see Jane Cornwell's article, 'For the Jazz legend Abdullah Ibrahim, breath control is the key to it all.' Available: <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/music/for-jazz-legend-abdullah-ibrahim-breath-control-is-the-key-to-it-all/news-story/2a889ebafcd283c62c5f6>. [2015, February 13]. See also, Christopher Chase, 'Prophetics in the Key of Allah: Towards an Understanding of Islam and Jazz.' In *Jazz Perspectives*, 1.4(2), August 2010, pp. 157–181.

African sociologist Bernard Magubane's characterisation of Mattera's life with that of Malcolm X compelling. In the perceptive quote that opens this chapter, Magubane noted how Don Mattera's 'evolution from a gangster to a [prominent] poet of the Black consciousness movement' not only is 'one of the greatest stories of human potential' but also represents a story 'similar to that of Malcolm X' (2009 [1987]: xxii).

Biographers of Malcolm X have written extensively about his transformation from a life of delinquency to one of the most critical voices of black liberation in the 20th century. However, besides writing on his leadership within the Nation of Islam, few works have bothered to reflect substantively on the implications of Islam in Malcolm X's sense of self-formation and subjectivity. In this regard, I agree with those who argue that Malcolm X's post-Nation of Islam phase is grossly 'ignored' (Siddique 1988). Both Samory Rashid in his short essay 'Islamic Aspects of the Legacy of Malcolm X' (1993) and Ali Siddique in *Malcolm X: Martyr of Islam in America* (1988) provide spirited attempts to redeem Malcolm as a Muslim hero, even though they err at times by making unsubstantiated claims. The added advantage of reflecting on Malcolm X is the presence of a critical body of scholarship in what is invariably termed 'Malcolm X studies' or 'Malcolmology' (Dyson 262–263; Marable 2011: 490).

The same cannot be said about Mattera, what is written on Mattera is in the context of South African literary history or black South African writing in English. To strike a balance and thus ensure an adequate reading of the two figures, the chapter is organised around three main sections. The first section provides a brief overview of the advent of Islam among blacks in South Africa and North America. Such a background serves as a backdrop to the second section, where there is a reflection on Don Mattera and Malcolm X's respective encounters with Islam. Such a reflection provides the context for the more theoretical discussion that is pursued in the third section, which seeks to expand the discursive concerns within

black/Africana existential writing and philosophy by paying critical attention to Islam as embodied in the life of these two subjects.

Islam and Black Experience in South Africa and North America: Brief Overview⁷⁴

Sherman Jackson in *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection* (2005) has made the perceptive observation that unlike in North America, the character of Islam among black South Africans remains different. ‘Blackamerican Islam’, Jackson has maintained, is marked by the presence of many charismatic figures and institutionalised Muslim organisations and movements. Such prominent and charismatic figures among African Americans include Noble Drew Ali, Elijah Muhammad, Imam W.D. Muhammad (son of Elijah Muhammad), Malcolm X, Louis Farrakhan and the more orthodox Sunni Imams like the New York-based Siraj Wahhaj. Also, Blackamerican Islam boasts, from as early as the 1960s, an impressive array of cultural and sports personalities, such as the late former heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali and the basketball player Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (Lincoln 1994: 166–167; see also Mazrui 1998: 169 - 84). In addition, as Zafar Ishaq Ansari has observed, black American Muslims are not a fringe group; they ‘constitute a very large segment of the Muslim population’ in the United States (Ansari 2004: 222; see also McCloud 2004: 81–82).

⁷⁴ Given the focus and scope of this study, it is not the intention here to delve into a detailed historical or sociological account of the origins and spread of Islam in either North American or South African contexts. Though still limited, especially in the context of South Africa, studies with a historical and sociological bent can be obtained from some of the available literature on the growth of Islam in both countries (Chapter One referred briefly to some of this literature, for example).

In regard to South Africa, while it would be inaccurate to say that there is an absence of charismatic figures (among black South African Muslims), Jackson is nevertheless correct to assert that one of the main differences is that in the South African context, there is still an absence of ‘an indigenously rooted vehicle’ that could help to ‘appropriate Islam’ for black South Africans (Jackson 2005: 28; see also Bangstad 2007). Inarguably, among charismatic figures in black Islam in South Africa, one can cite personalities like the late Kassim Ntombela, who is described, as ‘one of KwaZulu-Natal’s most dedicated and humble Islamic missionaries’ (*Al-Qalam* November 1994: 9). He has also been noted as someone ‘who since embracing Islam, gave his time and effort solely in propagating Islam’, such as his relentless efforts to invite the Zulu monarch King Goodwill Zwelithini to accept Islam (*Al-Qalam*, November 1994: 9). This manner of behavior was also pursued by another charismatic African Muslim leader, the late advocate Dawood Ngwane, who served as the first African Muslim to be elected ‘Ameer’ or ‘president’ of the *Islamic Propagation Centre International* (IPCI). Styling himself on his mentor, the late Ahmed Deedat, Ngwane invited the Zulu monarch King Goodwill Zwelithini to the launch of his book *Ubhaqa* in isiZulu (translated as *The Instrument of Light*) to give the keynote address. While introducing his book Ngwane ensured that he ‘invites his majesty’ to accept Islam (see Vahed 2013: 250–52).

Likewise, Adam Mcanywa, inspired mainly by the model of the Nation of Islam, presents himself as ‘Minister Adam’ or ‘Minister Mbhele’ (clan name) and has sought to align Islam with a blend of African culture and African nationalist sentiments. This he has done through the formation of ‘Abangoni’, which is an inter-religious cultural formation and developmental organisation, and through self-published booklets and public gatherings (see Kaarsholm 2011). The limited examples cited here are, nonetheless, the exception and not the norm. Generally, most black Muslim public personalities keep their Islam as a personal faith. This is true of the late South African jazz musician and saxophonist Zim Ngqawana (aka

Abdul-Aziz) who most of his fans and jazz lovers discovered at his funeral or *janazah* that he was a Muslim.⁷⁵ Likewise, the pianist Abdullah Ibrahim when pressed to comment on his attachment to Islam, considers his faith a personal affair that has to do with the self and spiritual growth.⁷⁶ The same temperament can be observed in other prominent black Muslim personalities, such as the current minister of science and technology Ms Naledi Pandor. These personalities, although committed to their faith, have not assumed the mantle of public spokespersons for Islam. It is for this reason, among others, that the late Al-Seppe referred to black African Muslims in the country as an ‘emerging’ and an ‘un-organized’ community, whereas Tayob, capturing the same observation, has used the metaphor of ‘under the shadows’ to emphasise the invisibility of a black and African led Islam in the country (Al-Seppe quoted in Sitoto 2002: 43–46; Tayob, *Al-Qalam* June 1995).

As for Don Mattera, though charismatic and someone who does occasionally indulge in subtle forms of Islamic proselytisation by inviting prominent black personalities,⁷⁷ especially when they are present in his audience, to accept Islam, Mattera has not styled himself

⁷⁵ See Mathew Burbidge’s article ‘Jazz Genius Zim Ngqawana Dies as 52.’ *Mail & Guardian*, 10 May 2011. Available: <https://mg.co.za/article/2011-05-10>. [2017, April 15]. See also, Sandile Ngidi’s ‘Zim Ngqawana’s Obituary’. *The Guardian*, Wednesday 6 July 2011. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/jul/06/zim-ngqawana-obituary>. [2017, May 14].

⁷⁶ See Abdullah Ibrahim’s interview by Ayanda Allie-Paine, ‘Up and Close with Legendary Abdullah Ibrahim. Available: <https://www.enca.com/media/video/up-close-with-legendary-musician-abdullah-ibrahim-part-1-of-3?playlist=112> [2018, January 17].

⁷⁷ This was the case, for example, on the occasion of the launch of an entity known as the African Muslim League in October 2010 where the guest of honour was the then premier of the province Dr Zweli Mkhize. See Vahed, 2013, p. 252.

in the fashion of the conventional ‘Islamiser’ or Muslim ‘minister’ in the mould of a Malcolm X or an Adam Mncanywa. Nor does he represent any distinct Muslim body or organisation. At best, Mattera is an independent critical voice whose praxis and discourse tend to be more ecumenical. Notwithstanding his occasional proselytising impulses, Mattera considers that any religion worthy of the tag ‘religion’ (including Islam) must be based ‘on compassion’ (quoted in Vahed 2012: 214; more on this point later).

Reference was made to the slight differences in the character of black Islam in North America from those of South Africa. However, it must be mentioned that inasmuch as there are noticeable differences, there are also striking commonalities. One major commonality is that of Islam’s appeal to blacks in both countries. With reference to South Africa, Ali Mazrui aptly sums up this appeal when he noted that as recently as ‘the 1990s’, Islam was still making steady ‘inroads into the Black townships’, that is, ‘after centuries of being confined to the Malay, Indian and “Coloured” sectors of the country’s multi-ethnic population’ (Mazrui 1998: 179).

This chapter, given its scope and focus, has deliberately avoided giving any detailed account of the historical, sociological or causal factors that often prompt black conversion to Islam. Besides, as indicated in Chapter One, there are, especially in the North American context, substantive works that look at the growth of Islam within the US Black population. These studies have ranged from works that deal with movements like the Nation of Islam, such as Eric Lincoln’s *The Black Muslims in America* (1994 [1961]), Magida’s *Prophet of Rage: A Life of Louis Farrakhan and His Nation* (1997), which provides a detailed biography of Louis Farrakhan and his leadership style, and Beverly McCloud’s *African American Islam* (1995). The latter work is a critical work that highlights the internal diversity and history of the various African American Muslim communities. Recent studies have begun to examine the quest for

theological sophistication in black Islam with a view to align it to be in concert with mainstream Islamic thought. This direction is evident in Sherman Jackson's latest works, namely *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection* (2005) and *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (2009). In addition, another growing body of literature on writings about black Islam is to be found in works that address the distinctive phenomenon of African American women's religious experience and conversion. Carolyn M. Rouse's *Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam* (2004) is representative of such works. In addition, the work of Debra Majeed, *Polygyny: What it Means When African American Muslim Women Share their Husbands* (2015), tackles the vexed question of polygyny in the African America Muslim community and places the agency and marital choices of black women at the centre of her enquiry.

Similarly, although not comparable to the American context by any measure, within South Africa, even though still negligible, academic interest in Islam within the country's African population has begun to produce a moderate body of literature. This is mostly in the form of a few academic articles that have appeared in the last two and half decades in different journals (see Haron 1992; Vawda 1994; Lliteras 2006; Lee 2005; Bangstad 2007; Sesanti 2009; Kaarsholm 2011). While this literature is useful, most of the writings are not attentive enough to a more sustained enquiry on questions that pertain to black African Muslim individual identity, subjectivity and self-formation.

‘But Allah Had Another Plan’: Mattera and Malcolm X’s ‘Black Pilgrimage to Islam’⁷⁸

Although reflections on Malcolm X’s encounter with Islam are to an extent facilitated by the increasing scholarship on him as hinted earlier, with regard to Mattera, literature is thin and dominated by cursory remarks that have hardly paid any substantive attention to his encounter with Islam. However, it must be added that while the moment of conversion in both Malcolm X and Mattera’s pilgrimage to Islam, to use Dannin Robert’s phrase, is important, this chapter does not treat their moments of conversion to Islam as once-off episodic events. In looking beyond the moment of conversion, the enquiry here is invested in exploring the implications of reading black subjectivities not so much through the prism of group and social identities but by accenting individual self-formation, sense of self and subjectivity. Hence, the chapter is not interested in black Muslim social histories or, for that matter, in forms of Black nationalism where black Muslim experiences are framed as either part of black religion or black nationalist movements (Jackson 2005; Pinn 2003; Ansari 2004: 222–267).

In addition, by reading Don Mattera with Malcolm X this study is not particularly interested in regurgitating the all-too-familiar narrative of their past lives as former delinquents and ‘ex-convicts’ or prisoners. To downplay this past is not to promote a sanitised version of their lives and careers. While Mattera’s and Malcolm’s stories of imprisonment, juvenile delinquency and being on the wrong side of the law remain crucial, the problem with such a one-sided narrative – as important as it is – is that it privileges a pathologising narrative of

⁷⁸ While the expression ‘But Allah had another plan’ is a phrase borrowed from Don Mattera (see *Al-Qalam* June 2013), the expression ‘Black pilgrimage to Islam’ is from Dannin Robert’s *Black Pilgrimage to Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).⁷⁸

black lives and experiences as a perpetual problem. Moreover, enough scholarship has reviewed the way in which black subjects are presented as a problem with no sense of agency to require another detailed discussion here.

For example, the South African literary critic and creative writer Lewis Nkosi in his review of Bloke Modisane's autobiography, *Blame Me on History*, literally castigates Modisane for having 'darkened' and 'caricatured' the real picture of himself as a hopeless pathological figure. This is a representation that Lewis Nkosi, as a contemporary of Bloke Modisane, believed had disfigured Modisane's life. As Nkosi retorts: 'what has happened to the more 'snazzy', urbane and intellectually sophisticated Modisane who had a 'formidable collection of classical' music, which ranged from 'Mozart, Beethoven, and Bartok to Stravinsky'? (Nkosi 2006 [1990]: 300–301). Nkosi is not negating the chronic conditions that blacks experienced at the time that Modisane was writing his autobiography. Rather, he is criticising a narrative that frames the black subject as being merely a victim of historical circumstances and thus existing without any sense of agency. Hence, while Nkosi understands that life in a black township 'was not a Sunday picnic', he is nevertheless still critical of Modisane's internalisation of a narrative that perpetuates a discourse of victimhood (Nkosi 2006 [1990]: 299).

The reference to Nkosi is neither a means to justify a neat narrative on Mattera and Malcolm X nor an attempt to downplay their delinquent backgrounds. The aim rather is not only to bring into sharp focus in their autobiographical/biographical narratives the perceived similarities in their experiences but also to highlight *how* Islam, as noted earlier, is deeply mapped and imbricated in their sense of self-formation and identity. This is not so much as an extra appendage to their sense of being black and African but as equally central in defining who they are in terms of their sense of self-understanding. In other words, read in the Sartrean

sense, Islam is not outside but integral to their ‘situation’ of ‘existence’ and place in the world. This assertion is affirmed by Malcolm’s statement when he asserts, ‘But Allah had blessed me to learn about the religion of Islam, which had enabled me to lift myself up from the muck and mire of this rotting world’ (Malcolm X 2001 [1965]: 395). The latter and similar statements in Malcolm’s public and private speeches underpin his endearment and appreciation of discovering Islam. Similarly, an appreciation for encountering Islam is captured by Mattera’s statement when he asserts that although he has received so many accolades, ‘Islam is one of the best accolades that he has received’, for ‘Allah had another plan’ (Mattera quoted in *Al-Qalam*, June 2013: 3).

Flight from an Anti-Black World?

But what mode of interpretation can best account for Mattera’s description of Islam as either the ‘best accolade’ for him or as a blessing for Malcolm X that ‘lifted’ him from ‘the muck and mire’ of a hostile world? Is it enough to interpret their gravitation to Islam in merely political terms as a flight from an anti-black world? Or, could their turn to Islam be interpreted as a representation of their enchantment with transcendence and the transcendent, hence not limited to a political reading?

In making sense of black gravitation to Islam, whether in the North American or South African contexts, it is often argued that Islam rather than Christianity has represented a path toward reclaiming one’s black and hence lost African identity. After all, Islam, as the narrative insists, especially in North America, was the religion of the African prior to their enslavement to the New World (Nyang 1993: 3). This is an assertion that has found extra boost in publications like Alex Haley’s historical novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976), which was later turned into a documentary film. Likewise, the contribution of historians to

slavery and African Muslims' presence among the early slaves is well captured by scholars like Michael Gomez in his *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Gomez 1998) and *Black Crescent: African Muslims in the Americas* (Gomez 2005). These works have served to give additional empirical backing to the view that Islam was some kind of return to one's lost religion and a path to reclaim one's lost Africanity. Thus, besides historical studies, works by diverse scholars such as Cone and Pinn (2003: 108–132) have also shown how Islam among blacks in the US 'was a religion specifically directed to "the Negro in the mud"' (Cone 1991: 51), hence its appeal. It is against the background of such persistent views that Malcolm X's turn to Islam rather than Christianity is generally understood; that is, as a rejection of the 'religion of the white man' (Lincoln 1994: 126; Cone 1991: 51).

But if Malcolm X encountered Islam in prison as Rashid (1993) points out, albeit not through 'the fictional character "Baines"' as depicted in Spike Lee's film 'Malcolm X' but through his siblings who were already Muslims under Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam (1993: 65; Siddique 1988: 4; Cone 1991: 49–52), Mattera encountered Islam much later, after he had long undergone what he terms his 'metamorphosis from a veritable violent beast to human being' (Mattera 2009 [1987]: 128). While there are some similarities in their stories of conversion, they are also underpinned by marked differences. Almost every writer who has written on Malcolm's conversion to Islam has defined it in purely political terms.

While the political reading of Malcolm's conversion to Islam cannot be faulted, I agree to an extent with Siddique's observation that such a political reading presents a skewed picture of Malcolm X's turn to Islam. In other words, it fails to treat Malcolm's gravitation to Islam in its totality (Siddique 1988: 1- 2). This view finds additional support in Sherman Jackson's assertion that if Malcolm X were alive today, he would have certainly championed a more

inclusive message that transcends the crude political rhetoric of the Nation of Islam. In fact, Jackson ventures into an imagined portrayal of such a Malcolm as ‘Ibn Taym X’. Accordingly, this transformed Malcolm in the imagined character of ‘Ibn Taym X’ would represent someone who was ‘grounded in both American reality and the classical [Muslim] Tradition’ (Jackson 2005: 167–168; see also Byrd and Miri 2016: 1 - 3).

Furthermore, Manning Marable’s recent biography *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (2011) has challenged what he considers to be an anachronistic presentation of Malcolm’s life by most of his biographers and others writing on him. Marable has preferred to read Malcolm’s life as ‘a life of reinvention’ and has argued in reference to Malcolm X’s Mecca and post-Mecca periods as moments that represent his ‘spiritual epiphany’. Remarking on Malcolm’s pilgrimage (to Mecca), Marable captured it as follows: ‘Several weeks later, Malcolm X appeared to experience a spiritual epiphany [...] he visited the holy city of Mecca on a spiritual hajj, and on returning to the United States declared that he had converted to orthodox Sunni Islam.’ Marable, however, adds that Malcolm’s ‘conversion’ not only marked his move away from the Nation of Islam but also entailed ‘his opposition to all forms of bigotry’ (Marable 2011: 3). In other words, his move away from the Nation of Islam was, in a sense, a complete conversion that marked both his ‘spiritual and political evolution’. On this latter note, it is worth citing Marable, especially when he comments on what he terms Malcolm’s ‘reinvention’ and his ‘lifelong quest’ for meaning in his life:

Malcolm’s journey of reinvention was in many ways centred on his lifelong quest to discern the meaning of his faith. As a prisoner, he embraced an anti-white, quasi-Islamic sect that nevertheless validated his fragmented sense of humanity and ethnic identity. But as he travelled across the world, Malcolm learned that orthodox Islam was in many ways at odds with the racial stigmatization and intolerance at the centre of the Nation of Islam’s creed. Malcolm came to adopt true Islam’s universalism and its belief that all could find Allah’s grace regardless of race. (2011: 12)

Driven by personal and a spiritual quest, the context and circumstances that influenced Mattera's turn to Islam are slightly different. Unlike Malcolm X, whose political maturity was embedded in his sense of being a Muslim and a champion of black Nationalist rhetoric in which the Nation of Islam served a dual purpose as both his religious and his political home, the situation was different for Mattera. By the time Mattera had embraced Islam, he was already a prominent political activist in the Black Consciousness Movement and an underground operative for the PAC.⁷⁹ As I have indicated in Chapter Two while referring to Mattera's turn to Islam, the reasons for his religious conversion cannot be attributed to solely political factors. Therefore, if Malcolm X had couched his turn to Islam in overt political language as a rejection of 'the religion of the White man', Mattera was more circumspect. Although deploying the Islamic idiom of *hijra* to depict his decision to embrace Islam – and he concedes that it was a flight away from Christianity⁸⁰ – on following his narrative more carefully, a different picture emerges. In particular, Mattera credits Islam's articulation of 'compassion' as the main catalyst for his conversion to Islam and not the rhetoric of political Islam. Thus, for Mattera, 'compassion' *is* his religion, irrespective of religious labels. For God or Allah is, as Mattera insists, the 'first dispenser of compassion' (Mattera quoted in Vahed 2012: 214). Even though conventionally a Muslim, Mattera's religious sensibility is more ecumenical. Thus through his yardstick of compassion, it does not matter whether one is a Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Jew or a follower of African traditional religion, 'compassion' transcends all barriers and therefore represents 'the highest form of religion' (Mattera quoted in Davie 2005: 7).

⁷⁹ See Don Mattera, interviewed by Madi Gray 2006; see also Vahed's 'Omaruddin Francisco Mattera (1935–)', 2012, pp. 211–218.

⁸⁰ From personal research notes based on a conversation with Mattera, 8 August 2010, Durban.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that, unlike Malcolm X, Mattera was spared from the trouble of encountering Islam through a movement whose Islamic orthodoxy and credentials were questioned. Mattera's moment with Islam as indicated in the biographical chapter, was through the mainstream and ultra-conservative piety-oriented *Tablighi Jamaat*. For it was the 'Tablighi's', as he refers to this group, that ensured his encounter with Islam was through orthodox ways from the onset. On the contrary, Malcolm's journey to 'orthodox Islam' was gradual. It ranged from Malcolm the ideologue of the Nation of Islam to a Malcolm X who only learned conventional postures of Muslim daily prayers during his pilgrimage to Mecca. And Malcolm X self-mockingly notes how such an experience made him 'angry [...] for not having taken the time to learn more of the orthodox prayer rituals before leaving America' (Malcolm X 2001 [1964]: 441) and for his lack of appreciating 'the colour-blindness of the Muslim world's religious society' (Malcolm quoted in Siddiqui 1988: 11).

The shift in Malcolm X's racial consciousness must not be mistaken to mean a blind acceptance of the politics of racial integration. Inasmuch as Malcolm had through his *hajj* or pilgrimage experience become colour blind, for a while he remained committed to Black Nationalism and a pan-Africanist vision for black Americans. Thus, 'Muslim Mosque, Inc.' was formed to cater to the religious needs of his followers, whereas the *Organisation of African-American Unity* (OAAU) would deal with political matters and an agenda for black liberation. The latter organisation, Malcolm envisioned, would be 'different' from the Nation of Islam. As he noted: 'Substantially [...] the organisation I hoped to build would be different from the Nation of Islam in that it would embrace all faiths of black men (*sic*), and it would carry into practice what the Nation of Islam had only preached (Malcolm X 2001 [1965]: 427).

Admittedly, as a caution, in analysing Malcolm's shift from the Nation of Islam, Marable has advised against 'a revisionist history' account that is discernible in especially the

Muslim interpreters of Malcolm. Such a revisionist account is underpinned by a dual framing of Malcolm X as either a personification of hate speech and a racial demagogue under the tutelage of Elijah Muhammad; or a sanitised Malcolm that is delinked from Elijah Muhammad in the ‘post Mecca’ period. The latter Malcolm is portrayed as either an ‘intergrationist’ or champion of a pan-Islamist revolutionary agenda as painted by Samory Rashid (1993) and confirmed by Ali Siddique,

Malik Shabazz is mostly misunderstood, even by his own people. He was called preacher of violence, leftist, socialist, racist, and what not. But after his martyrdom he became an instant hero of the Black Nationalist and socialist movement [...] They over-emphasized his work before Islam and completely ignored his contribution to revive the original religion of the Black people – Islam and to establish the Islamic movement to bring about fundamental socio-economic and economic changes. (Siddique 1988: 2)

Without downplaying Malcolm X’s passion for Islam, Ali Siddique’s framing of Malcolm X as a pan-Islamist revolutionary is rather overenthusiastic.⁸¹ Given Malcolm X’s premature death due to his assassination, his ideological and political views remain contested. What is clear is that by the time Malcolm had separated from the Nation of Islam, his view of religion – possibly influenced by his unpleasant experience with the Nation of Islam – was that it was a private matter or personal spiritual quest. To emphasise the latter view is not to be unmindful of Dyson’s remarks regarding the ‘demand’ among Malcolm X’s interpreters for ‘a certainty about Malcolm [...]’ (Dyson 2004: 284).

On the contrary, reference to Malcolm X’s stance on religion here is not premised on demand for ‘certainty’, nor is it intended to depoliticise him. The aim is to privilege a reading

⁸¹ In his critique of Malcolm’s biographers, Dyson has cautioned against constructing Malcolm X through the biographer ‘projecting’ his or her biases ‘onto the historical screen of a black figure’s career’. See Michael Dyson, *The Michael Dyson Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004), p. 280.

or hermeneutic that is attentive to the personal instead of an over-preoccupation with the political in the life of Malcolm X (and Mattera). Accordingly, in its reading of Mattera with Malcolm X, this chapter questions such a one sided reading of the lives of these figures. It argues that the political self in Mattera and Malcolm X does not necessarily negate the religious and spiritual self, hence the critique below.

Reading Mattera and Malcolm X through black/Africana Existential Philosophy

Against the background of the preceding sections, the aim here is to interpret and examine the meaning of Mattera and Malcolm X through the lenses of black/Africana existential philosophy. The reason for selecting this approach, as argued before (Chapters One and Three), is premised on a quest to find a way of thinking about these two figures that is attentive to their sense of self and the language they use to make sense of their universe (and vision) through an enabling mode of enquiry. However, in the light of Gordon's insistence that not every reflection and writing automatically qualifies as representing Africana existential philosophy, on what basis can the two figures referred to here be situated within the context of the latter intellectual enquiry? To appreciate this question, it is necessary to capture the distinction that Gordon makes in delineating what is Africana existential philosophy.

Gordon has defined black/Africana existential philosophy as an intellectual enquiry that is different from 'existentialism' understood as a uniquely 'European historical phenomenon' (Gordon 1997: 3). According to Gordon, what distinguishes black/Africana existential philosophy is its uncompromised stance that foregrounds black and African shared experiences. And critical to those shared experiences (black and African), Gordon concedes, are 'concerns for freedom, anguish, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality and [quest for] liberation' (Gordon 1997: 3). Accordingly, it is through accenting the 'situation' of blacks and

Africans in the world that the critical edifice for doing black/Africana existential philosophy is signified. In short, through the ‘situation’ of black /African existence –*situation* being a notion drawn from Sartre’s philosophical insights – Gordon proceeds to demarcate what he prefers to term intentionally as Africana or black ‘philosophy of existence’ (Gordon 2000: 5–10).

In particular, the epistemological difference, as Gordon asserts, rests more with the critique of the very “‘situation” of questioning or inquiry itself” (2000:5). In other words, what is the meaning of the ‘context of concern’ regarding the black situation? Drawing an inference from the example of the slave, Gordon explains the crux of his argument: ‘A slave’s situation can only be understood, for instance, through recognizing the fact that a slave experiences it.’ The inference from this is that ‘Africana’ or black peoples’ situation of being in the world can, at best, be understood by the fact that they share or have a common experience of their *situation*. Hence, Africana or black philosophy of existence must raise ‘its own unique set of existential questions’ (Gordon 1997: 3–4).

The presentation of Africana existential philosophy as an oppositional discourse – that is, whether it is through taking up issues of race, justice or freedom – finds further support in Tsenay Serequeberhan’s work. In *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy: Horizon and Discourse*, Serequeberhan is unambiguous about its discursive task. Foregrounding the work of Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral as ‘paradigmatic’ for an African philosophical hermeneutic of existence, Serequeberhan considers the task of the black and African philosopher and, by inference, philosophical enterprise to be clear: It must be a form of intellectual praxis or ‘a situated emancipatory thinking’ (1994: 118). Such thinking is then equated with ‘the theoretic labors’ embodied in Fanon’s and Cabral’s thought. Mediated through the latter view, the task of African philosophy as an ‘emancipatory thinking’ is to confront ‘the Eurocentric residue *in thought* inherited from colonialism’ (1994: 118–119).

Thus, for Serequeberhan, African ‘philosophical hermeneutics’ provide a model of African philosophical practice that serves as ‘the questioning voice of those whom the modern European world compelled into voicelessness in the process of its own violent and self-righteousness’ (Serequeberhan 1994: 119).

The thrust of Gordon and Serequeberhan positions finds additional endorsement in Magnus O. Bassey’s ‘What is Africana Critical Theory or Black Existential Philosophy’ (2007) where the conventional standpoint of Black existential philosophy or what Bassey terms Africana Critical Theory is reiterated. Citing Gordon, Bassey has argued that the latter philosophy is not primarily premised ‘on the uniqueness of the individual’ and ‘universalist conception of humans and their obligation to the self’ but on the social condition and place of Black people in the world (Gordon quoted in Bassey 2007).⁸²

If the position advanced by Gordon, Serequeberhan and Bassey is taken, even though they represent a set of complex positions, a consensus of what black/Africana existential philosophy stands for begins to emerge. It is presented as an oppositional philosophical enquiry whose stance or epistemic shift, as Gordon would emphasise it, rests on how this philosophical tradition accentuates ‘existential questions’ that confront black and African humanity. Hence, it is unambiguous in how it foregrounds issues of freedom, presence, voice, and African and black agency. In other words, the logic, content and discursive priorities within African existential philosophy foregrounds unapologetically the political narrative of black and African suffering in the world.

⁸² See Magnus O. Bassey’s essay, ‘What is Africana Critical Theory or Black Existential Philosophy?’ *Journal of Black Studies*, 37(6): 914 - 935. DOI:10.1177/0021934705285563. [2014, February 5].

But is the position captured above on black/Africana existential philosophy not based on generalising the black and African experience as one that can only be understood through the hermeneutic of struggle, where black and African experience is homogenised as an experience that can only be understood through the logic of victimhood and subjects in protest? Among those who have raised a critique of this kind, though not directed at Africana existential philosophy per se, is Achille Mbembe. In an essay that is a counterpoint to his critics, Mbembe questions the framing of the African subject as a ‘wounded and traumatized subject’ (2002: 630). In fact, Mbembe argues more forcefully in favour of a philosophical enquiry that resists an intellectual enquiry that ends up ‘being nothing more than the repression of a fantasy written on one’s consciousness [...] and internalized to a point of compulsive repetition’ (Mbembe 2002: 630–636). In other words, to emphasise ‘a traumatised subject’ borders on a discourse that is content with representing the African subject only through the ‘grammar of difference’; as such, it suffers from ‘philosophical poverty’. Taking a cue from Mbembe, without necessarily agreeing with his rather harsh critique, it is nevertheless worth asking if it is adequate to interpret black and African experiences and lives only through the logic of struggle and suffering?

The Paradox of Race and Quest to Transcend ‘Racial Frontiers’

The last set of questions specifically to Mattera and Malcolm X poses serious reservations for black/Africana existential philosophy’s penchant for privileging of struggle, race, and the protesting subject as its only discursive concerns. Notwithstanding Mattera and Malcom X’s roles as outspoken opponents of all forms of oppression and dehumanisation of black and African subjects, they also show inclinations of transcendence. For instance, one of Mattera’s emblematic statements best captures such an inclination where he asserts that his life, his story,

is but '*the* story of transcendence'. Alternatively, as Marable and Dyson have observed with the case of Malcolm X, Malcolm's life has never 'stayed fixed in one position for very long' but remained, as described by Marable, 'a chronology of changes' (Marable 2011: 12).

Now, any critical reading of these figures cannot evade Mattera's and Malcolm X's self-understanding and self-identification. To do so would be tantamount to a reading that promotes a static ontology that disfigures Mattera's and Malcolm's sense of self and understanding. Hence, the question of whether the conventional framing of black/Africana existential philosophy as a philosophy that places a premium on the hermeneutic of struggle is adequate to account for what are clearly complex subjects? Would it not be better to read Malcolm and Mattera through a reading that is open and demands black /Africana existential philosophy to consider what is presented in this study as a hermeneutic of transcendence – that is, as a means to offer a more comprehensive portrayal of Mattera and Malcolm X's self-understanding and identification?

While both Mattera's and Malcolm X's politics have been mediated through an oppositional discourse that has sought to subvert the status quo in a world that has diminished their humanity and, by inference, black humanity, to accede to such a view only provides a reductionist reading of their subjectivity and quest for self-formation. The chapter argues that even though both Malcolm X and Mattera have remained proud of their black and African roots, their encounters with Islam has muted their black and African pride through fostering an identity that transcends colour and racial belonging. For example, in the case of Malcolm X, almost all writings on him have identified his *hajj* or pilgrimage experience to Mecca as a moment of gravitation to orthodox Islam, which in turn enabled Malcolm to transcend race consciousness. As Comstock has noted, Malcolm X returned from Mecca 'a forgiving man who saw the humanity of all individuals' and realised that there were 'Muslims of different

racess around the world [...]’ (Comstock 1995: 332–333). Likewise, while Mattera has refused to accept the apartheid designation of ‘Coloured’ or the pejorative label ‘Boesman’ (Bushman), he has preferred to call himself ‘the best African there is’(Mattera). In fact, Mattera would simultaneously qualify such an account of himself with the disclaimer: ‘I do not play the colour line.’ In other words, inasmuch as Mattera has taken pride in his African identity and roots, and even though his politics were steeped in Black Consciousness, he was nevertheless able to transcend an identity based purely on racial identification. And if that is the case, then how can such a paradox be explained? Here are figures who were champions of black and African pride and freedom, yet with the capacity to transcend such a vision.

Gregory Stevens in his *On Racial Frontiers* (1999) confronts a similar question and might provide insight into how it is addressed. Stevens is at pains to illustrate that, in many ways, Frederick Douglas, Ralph Ellison and Bob Marley, even though prominent black subjects championing black pride, are appropriate to view as transracial figures. In particular, Stevens argues that given their refusal to be ‘confined by rigid racialist binaries’, any responsible interpretation of their identities must take account of such a refusal. In other words, by refusing the binary of black and white, Stevens has moved to interpret Douglas, Ellison and Marley as figures who have transcended racial categories and modes of identity (Stevens 1999). In a similar way, it could be argued that inasmuch as both Malcolm X and Mattera are committed to black pride and a politics based on pan-Africanist ideals, they nevertheless transcend race consciousness or, to use Steven’s expression, ‘racial frontiers’ (1999). To advance this view in

this chapter is not to project a subjective ‘intellectual biase’⁸³ on Malcolm and Mattera. On the contrary, it is a view that is reflected in Mattera’s and Malcolm’s life stories and their existential situations.

Cone, another critical reader of Malcolm X, has argued that Malcolm had evolved to become an ‘internationalist’ and ‘a humanist’ in both his vision and temperament (Cone quoted in Dyson 2004: 283). Thus, although Malcolm, as Dyson insists ‘embodied ideals of Black rebellion and revolutionary social action’, when read comprehensively, Malcolm X evolved to possess a colour-blind consciousness that transcended race for an inclusive embrace of the humanity of the Other (Dyson 2004: 262). Hence, Dyson has cautioned against a one-dimensional account of Malcolm as the angry firebrand of black pride (Dyson 2004: 263). Such a fragmented portrayal of Malcolm distorts his broader vision and sense of self.

Likewise, inasmuch as Mattera was a protagonist of the Black Consciousness Movement with a close political affinity with the Pan African Congress (PAC), he nevertheless embodied a transracial sensitivity and consciousness whose importance has yet to be appreciated. In fact, in almost all of his religious platforms when owning up to his Muslim self, he articulates an ecumenical sensibility and a consciousness that transcends narrow religious affiliation, denominations, sects and belonging. Mattera, as highlighted in the section that referred to his encounter with Islam, is enchanted by Islam’s notion of compassion, which served as the catalyst for his conversion. And he has since mobilised the idea of compassion to arrive at a non-sectarian notion of religion. Hence, Mattera maintains that true religion is ‘the

⁸³ Eric Dyson in his critique of psychobiography with regard to Malcolm X studies has cautioned against the temptation to project the ‘psychobiographer’s intellectual biases and limitations of perspective onto the historical screen of a black figure’s career’ (Dyson 2004: 280).

religion of compassion' and accordingly seeks to model his own life as reflected in the following statement.

Compassion is my religion and God is the dispenser of the first compassion. Jesus, peace be on his name, was the hallmark of compassion. Mohammed, peace be on his name, was the hallmark of compassion [...] And you read in the Qur'an, God is explicit about compassion. (Mattera quoted in Vahed 2012: 214)

It is worth pausing at this point to interrogate Mattera's fascination with compassion slightly beyond the descriptive level. What insights can be drawn through a reading that pays attention to compassion as reflected in Mattera's language and usage? And to what extent can such a reflection assist a comprehensive reading of both Mattera and Malcolm X in this chapter?

On Compassion as Self-Transcendence

While literature is replete with the variety of ways in which the notion of compassion is used, especially within the humanities, reference to compassion in this chapter is as a means to broaden the interpretation of Mattera and, to an extent, Malcolm X.

In 'Compassion and Transcendence of Duty and Inclination' (1981), alan r. drengson⁸⁴ seeks to extend Kant's notion of love. While Kant's notion of love is expressed as either in the 'pathological' or in the 'passionate' sense or as duty or 'practical love', drengson has, by inference, turned to compassion as 'a third possibility' not considered by Kant. In particular, drengson argues that unlike the other categories favoured by Kant, there is a substantive difference when acting out of compassion – for 'when one acts from compassion one's concern

⁸⁴ By writing alan drengson's name in lower case, I have simply observed the convention used by drengson.

is the welfare of the other'; as such, 'acting from compassion' represents 'action which transcends both sentiment [passion] and sense of duty' (drengson 1981: 34–35).

Also, although discussing compassion with a view to arrive at a 'Theory of Compassion', Tim Lomas in his article 'Self-Transcendence Through Shared Suffering: An Intersubjective Theory of Compassion' argues that although compassion is an 'enigmatic' concept and is highly valorised, especially in Buddhist traditions, it can help us to arrive at a better sense of selfhood. Among its qualities, 'compassion inherently involves a process of self-transcendence' or an 'inter-subjective state' (Lomas 2015: 182). In other words, embedded in compassion is the ability, as Lomas has argued, for the 'protagonist' – the giver of compassion – to empathise with the condition of the Other. Put differently, the self of the protagonist of compassion is transformed and is hence transcended through empathy for the Other.

Turning to Mattera and drawing on both Lomas's and drengson's insights that compassion represents an articulation of transcendence or a self-transcendence of sorts, it can be asserted that Mattera's claim that he embodies compassion through his actions and language represents another instance of transcendence. Accordingly, Mattera articulates a vision of humanity that is inclusive and which collapses boundaries across religion and race and which portends to a common and inclusive humanity. Likewise, Marable, in his summary of Malcolm's vision, has observed that inasmuch as Malcolm X was known as a fire-spiting radical and revolutionary leader, his overall message and vision was underpinned by a deep sense of compassion that transcended to encompass all, irrespective of race and cultural belonging.

However, the kind of transcendence as compassion referred to here is still limited to interpersonal relations and inter-subjectivity. While the latter view is partly true, this chapter

argues that compassion as ‘self-transcendence’, even when applied in the context of Mattera (and, to an extent, Malcolm X), is not limited to the horizontal plane of interpersonal and interhuman subjectivity alone. Rather, compassion as transcendence also refers to the beyond.

In other words, as Muslim subjects, Mattera and Malcolm X transcend the image of angry subjects in perpetual protest. As subjects endeared to the transcendent, they recognise human fallibility and hence surrender to an otherness or alterity beyond the human self. Of course, Mattera, who has had the privilege of living longer than Malcolm X (who was assassinated), has had the added advantage of thinking through his sense of being as a Muslim and, by inference, religion in general. This may have contributed to Mattera’s assertion that ‘compassion is the highest form of religion’ and his self-characterisation as the embodiment of compassion and transcendence. Accordingly, viewed as a subject attuned to transcendence, the black, African Muslim self, read through Mattera and Malcolm X embodies a complex and transcendental subjectivity and self.⁸⁵

What emerges from the discussion that has ensued is that transcendence in the context of both Mattera and, to an extent, Malcolm X operates in a double or dialectical sense. Dialectic is used here in a minimalist sense to connote how transcendence is imbricated in one instance on the horizontal plane through interpersonal relationships or empathy with the Other, whereas on the other level it refers to the vertical sense of being pulled beyond the self.

⁸⁵ This reading of Mattera and Malcolm X was initially informed by my preliminary essay on Mattera and informed by insights from Pinn’s notion of complex subjectivity. However, Pinn does not give prominence to vertical transcendence beyond inter-human subjectivities. See essay ‘Complex Subjectivities’: Don Omaruddin Mattera’s Conversion to Islam, Beyond a Political Reading and a Biographical Essay’, pp. 153 - 176; see also Anthony Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 173.

Inarguably, the view espoused of taking transcendence as a thematic concern in the rereading of Mattera and Malcolm X challenges the conventional articulation of Africana existential philosophy, as intimated earlier, as ‘inherently oppositional and *hence limited to a liberatory*’ praxis, as some of its main protagonists have maintained. Through a critical reading of Don Mattera and Malcolm X, the argument advanced is that Africana existential philosophy cannot be limited to an ‘inherently oppositional’ discursive practice and thus conceived of in crude binaries of oppression and freedom. The contribution that Africana/Islamica existential philosophy and thought as embodied by Mattera and Malcolm X makes is that it also becomes a transformational and transcendental philosophy of existence. Or, to rephrase, rather than perpetuate a discourse of negativity where blacks are only subjects of protest, an Africana/Islamica existential philosophy gives premium to matters of transcendence. In short, it posits a mode of critical enquiry that is not limited to the rhetoric of the political alone. Alternatively, to put it differently, it seeks to transcend the materiality of the political by also giving eminence to matters that pertain to the spiritual, self and transcendent. If black/Africana existential philosophy is to transcend the banality of an oppositional philosophy, and if it is to be true to the multifaceted dimensions of the black/African subject, then it must account for the persistence of transcendence in subjects like Mattera and Malcolm X who, in the Sartrean sense, seek authentic living and an escape from ‘bad faith’.

As Martin notes in his *Oppression and the Human Condition: An Introduction to Sartrean Existentialism* (2002: vii), there is a tendency to ‘deny’ or expunge transcendence from Sartre’s existential philosophy. This, Thomas argues, stems largely from a misreading of Sartre’s idea of ‘bad faith’, ‘facticity’ or notion of ‘the situation’ (Martin 2002: 1- 5). These terms denote, in the Sartrean sense, conditions that deny one from authentic living or from an authentic sense of being in the world. However, reference to Sartre here underscores two issues.

First, in the quest to define black or Africana existential philosophy, Sartre in the genealogy of Africana existential philosophy serves as one of the early inspirations for its theoretical formulation. This is so, as Gordon has noted, because Sartre together with Simone de Beauvoir ‘were particularly interested in the existential situation of blacks’ (Gordon 2000: 13). In other words, ‘their philosophies of existence’ were particularly interested or ‘premised upon a critical encounter with bad faith’ (that is, the situation in which most black subjects found themselves trapped in). Thus, Sartre’s notion of ‘bad faith’ is posited as the privileged point of departure for black/Africana existential philosophy. Accordingly, for its relevance and meaning, the latter philosophy has forged a link between conventional Sartrean readings of existential philosophy as a philosophy premised on existential questions as they pertain to the now and here of human existence.

However, as Thomas and other Sartrean scholars have noted, the view that Sartre’s existential philosophy is premised on the denial of transcendence is highly problematic. Hence, Thomas has argued that it is incorrect to take the idea of Sartre’s notion of ‘bad faith [...] as a denial’ of transcendence (Thomas 2002: x – xii). For even though informed by an ‘inter-subjective’ impulse, to deny bad faith entails an ‘acceptance of transcendence’ albeit one based on intersubjective transcendence (Thomas 2002: xii). While Martin has arrived at this conclusion through a careful analysis of ‘Sartre’s phenomenology’ and Sartre’s ‘theory of consciousness’, Kris Sealey, another Sartrean scholar, has juxtaposed Sartre with Levinas in a recent work titled *Moments of Disruption* (2013). Thus, through such an ‘intersectional’ reading, she maintains, transcendence is very much embedded in Sartre’s philosophy. Focusing in particular on what she terms Sartre’s and Levinas’s ‘phenomenologies of the Other’, Sealey ends with a reading of Sartre that narrows the traditional gap between the two philosophers. In particular, Sealey asserts that Levinas’s ‘obsessive responsibility for the Other’ as ‘radical exit of being’ is complimented by Sartre’s accentuation of a transcendence committed to the human

subject or being (Sealey 2013: 30). In other words, even though Sartre and Levinas's 'accounts of transcendence' seem to be 'at odds', reading them together helps to arrive at a deeper appreciation of how the question of transcendence is mediated in their respective phenomenologies of Self and Other. In this regard, a brief account of Sartre and Levinas's accounts of transcendence might be necessary.

Although representing complex philosophies, as Sealey has maintained, when Sartrean transcendence is read against Levinas, what is considered transcendence in Sartre, is according to Levinas not real transcendence. In other words, the 'Sartrean formulation of conscience, as an intentional projection of "self", does not come to Levinas as genuine transcendence' (Sealey 2011: 30–31). Genuine transcendence for Levinas must be free from ontology. In other words, transcendence for Levinas represents 'a move toward the metaphysical' and is beyond being and self (Sealey 2011: 31).

Because this chapter is not about the question of transcendence as manifested in either Sartrean or Levinas's thought, the chapter will not enter into an evaluation of whether Sartre's philosophy of self and Other represents real transcendence or not. Rather, by drawing on the insights of the two philosophers, the aim is to illuminate the argument advanced in this chapter. By turning to Mattera and Malcolm X, it can be argued in the context of this chapter that transcendence manifests itself in both the Sartrean and the Levinasian sense. And if both accounts of transcendence are manifest in Mattera and Malcolm X, then in the context of this study, black/Africana existential philosophy cannot escape the question of transcendence. In other words, it is not sufficient for Africana existential philosophy to capture black subjectivity only through an oppositional protest philosophy; or, valorising as popularised by Leonard Harris, 'a philosophy born out of struggle' (1983). While the historical context, conditions and logic that gave rise to its initial formulation are understandable, if Africana existential

philosophy is to guard against fossilisation and entrapment in the rhetoric of struggle, then it needs to widen its discursive horizons. Accordingly, the consequence of reading Don Mattera and Malcolm X through attentiveness to Islam as a constituent element of their identities and, by inference, where transcendence is imbricated in their sense of self and subjectivity places the question of transcendence squarely on the agenda of black/Africana existential discursive practice.

In particular, the ‘facticity’ of Islam as embodied in Mattera’s and Malcolm’s subjectivities and sense of self represents the hermeneutic instance to read these figures comprehensively as figures who embody notions of transcendence in both the Sartrean and Levinasian senses of transcendence. For to punt the Sartrean inter-subjective transcendence alone would be based on a denial of transcendence in the Levinasian sense of a transcendence that finds meaning outside the ontology of being.

Concluding Remarks

Foregrounding notions of transcendence and complex subjectivity, this chapter has argued that the black/African Muslim self in the context of Don Mattera and Malcolm X are complex rather than one-dimensional subjects. As complex subjects, they represent a transcendental subjectivity that, though alert to its sense of being black and African in the world, espouses a transcendental consciousness and transcendental self beyond ontology. Accordingly, Mattera’s self-representation that his life, his story, is but ‘*the* story of transcendence’, as well as Marable’s characterisation of Malcolm X’s life as a ‘series of chronological shifts’ to transcend a static ontology, both Mattera and Malcolm X display a sense of discomfort with a closed identity and valorisation of Blackness. Certainly, there are times when the black and African self is celebrated with great pride. However, these subjects also recognise the need to surpass

racial belonging and embrace an inclusive humanity. Hence, the chapter has questioned previous readings and interpretations of these figures, their views and vision through the prism of protesting subjects that are forever locked in modes of protest, and in their blackness.

Admittedly, critics like Bassey, dismiss focusing on self and individual subjectivity as succumbing to the ‘aestheticisation’ of the subject and individual self. However, to foreground the self and individual subjectivity is prompted in this study by a different logic. It is premised on a quest to challenge the framing of black subjectivity through the logic and discourse of protest alone or the proverbial Duboisian question on ‘the problem of Black existence’.⁸⁶ ‘Bad faith’ and ‘facticity’ of black existence, this study contends, are capable of transcending the political materiality of black suffering. Accordingly, in the context of Mattera and Malcolm X, these figures cannot be read narrowly through the classical maxim of black/Africana existential philosophy: ‘I exist therefore I protest.’ Through Mattera and Malcolm X’s reading, this chapter has argued that when black Muslim self-understanding and self-formation is taken into consideration, it adds another texture to how black/Africana existential philosophy might be conceptualised and envisioned. Furthermore, the view expressed in this chapter finds resonance, albeit from a slightly different focus, in Anderson’s *Beyond Ontological Blackness* (1995), which criticises black American theological enterprise for valorising Blackness and Black suffering. Critical of what he terms the ‘classical black aesthetic’, Anderson has argued for a black aesthetic that is attentive to all the complexities and diverse experiences that make up black life. Blackness and suffering, he contends, do not equal the sum total of black

⁸⁶ See Lewis Gordon, Chapter: ‘What Does it Mean to be a Problem.’ In Lewis Gordon’s, *Existential Africana*, 2000, pp. 62–95.

existence. The trenchant to hold on to the latter, he maintains, limits the possibility of what Anderson has referred to as ‘a race-transcending prophetic criticism’ (Anderson 1995:35).

Although Anderson’s position has attracted much criticism, it does find sympathy in Pinn’s concise summarising of his project not as one driven by a desire to distort ‘black identity [...] as absurd’ but as one that marks a significant ‘philosophical shift’. In short, it represents an appreciation of ‘a fuller range of life options and sensibilities [...]’ of Black subjects where, in particular, ‘black religious thought is able to address issues of survival and the larger goal of cultural fulfillment’ (Pinn 2003: 106–107).

What is distinctive about the argument pressed here is that in the context of Malcolm X and Mattera, Islam as a component of black and African cultural experience is not an alien category. On the contrary, it constitutes their sense of self, consciousness and subjectivity. In other words, Islam in the life of these figures represents an instance of transcending the ontology of Blackness. This is not so much a denial of racial belonging and hence a desire to erase one’s roots in black and African experience and cultural formation. Rather, as argued in this chapter, it is to illustrate that Don Mattera and Malcolm X are no longer *just* black or African subjects. As members of the universal community or the *Ummah*, they have self-consciously embraced a universal and hence transcendental consciousness – that is, a consciousness and identity that is not trapped in ancestry, history and place. In addition, to deny this ‘facticity’ of their being would be not only epistemologically flawed but also philosophically untenable. In short, such a denial would be, in the Sartrean sense, a perpetuation of ‘bad faith’ and by inference a denial of transcendence. However, such transcendence is not limited to Sartrean transcendence of an intersubjective self; it represents a transcendence that is ‘ruptured’ or ‘pulled’ in the Levinasian sense by Alterity beyond

inter-human subjectivity. In the latter sense, Mattera and Malcolm could then be read as representing a transcendental subjectivity that, though attentive to the human and the temporal, is also conscious of metaphysical transcendence. Put differently, to find meaning in their lives, their quest is not limited to finding meaning only in the concrete and real world, hence the imperative to protest and struggle in order to live as authentic subjects. Rather, beyond ontology, they also seek to find meaning through openness to the metaphysical. This is evident both in Mattera's words 'Allah had a better plan' and in Malcolm's, who thanked 'Allah' for 'lifting' him up out of 'the muck and mire' of a decaying world.

In short, to be true to the 'situation' of Mattera and Malcolm demands a responsible interpretation and analysis that is attentive to all the complex dimensions that undergird their sense of self, self-formation and subjectivity and must thus be inclusive of Islam, which is central to their universe and sense of being in the world. It is, therefore, in this specific sense that the idea of an Africana/Islamica existential thought as referred to in this study is intended. It is to connote and capture a discursive sensibility that extends the privileged concerns within black/Africana existential philosophy as conventionally construed beyond their thematic privileging of the familiar tropes of struggle, protest and a suffering subject.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION: DRAWING MEANINGS, READINGS AND AN INTERPRETATION

The presence of meaning produces a melancholy stasis, a violent freezing of the possibilities that continuing play of competing meanings and different readings may still harbor. (Richter 2002: 233)

The historically saturated, explorative self-reflection is the basic character of philosophy, whether consciously recognized as such or not, and constitutes the explicit self-awareness of hermeneutics as a philosophical orientation. (Serequeberhan 1994: 19)

[...] hermeneutical thinkers argue that language and history are always both conditions and limits to understanding. (Wachterhauser 1986: 6)

Introduction

How does one read and interpret the work and thought of someone who clearly defies disciplinary boundaries, methods and modes of enquiry? And *how* can the thought and intellectual project of someone who self referentially describes himself and his work as *the* ‘story of transcendence’ be explored in a manner that would be attentive to this subjective iteration and self-understanding of the main protagonist of this study? With these questions in the background, this concluding chapter has used the expression ‘drawing meanings, readings and an interpretation’ deliberately – with *meanings* and *readings* in the plural form. By doing so, the aim is to register a simple fact: inasmuch as this study has argued for a particular *meaning* and *reading*, this does not prevent the possibility of alternative readings and meanings that future scholarship on Don Mattera might explore. To say this, however, does not suggest

that the conclusion reached in the study is ambivalent. To make sense of the conclusion, therefore, it might be useful to recapture the study as it has progressed through the different chapters.

Chapter One served as the introduction to the dissertation by providing the background and motivation. It foregrounded the argument pursued throughout the study, which is that Don Mattera can at best be read and interpreted through a hermeneutic that is not confined by time, context or a narrow historical reading. Rather, Mattera should be interpreted through a hermeneutic that is equally attentive to the contradictions that are embedded in what is aptly captured by Wachterhauser's emphasis in the third epigraph of this conclusion, which asserts that although 'language and history' provide possibilities for deeper ways of understanding, both 'conditions' can be an impediment to a critical understanding (Wachterhauser 1986: 6). Accordingly, inspired by the latter logic and data of this study, the dissertation has challenged the narrow historicity espoused by black/Africana existential philosophy in its valorisation of the hermeneutic of struggle and protest as the only lenses to read black and African subjectivities and sense of self. A closer look at the chapters of this dissertation will make this assertion clearer.

With a view to sketch a portrait of Mattera's intellectual achievements, Chapter Two illustrated the continued relevance of Mattera in black intellectual history beyond the moment of struggle and protest. Hence, it was argued that Mattera is more than just 'the intellectual bridge' between the Sophiatown intellectual traditions and the 'Soweto 1976 Generation.' He continues to inspire several aspiring and upcoming poets and writers, especially young poets in the post-apartheid moment. The latter generation often look up to Mattera as an iconic figure and role model. This underpins the trans-historical and universal texture in Mattera's work and his discourse, which the study maintains transcends time and context. Because black African intellectual history in South Africa is skewed and often told in the context of the role of early

Christian mission history and its impact on black and African intellectual life, it has failed to accommodate intellectual contributions of figures like Don Mattera who do not fit the stereotype of a native transformed through missionary schools. By focussing on Mattera's intellectual achievements, life of self-transformation, transcending a delinquent past to a formidable poet, an activist turning Muslim, and one of the critical intellectuals of the Black Consciousness Movement, this chapter served as a corrective to Mattera's 'displacement' in black and African intellectual history in the country. Furthermore, it has argued that the added advantage with a focus on Mattera is that he has lived to witness the post-liberation moment and as such, his intellectual insights and work remain critical. Thus, Chapter Three set the context for elaborating on a method and conceptual approach that would do justice to a critical study on Don Mattera.

But the choice of Don Mattera as a critical focus in this study has presented a challenge with regard to which method and theoretical approach would be best suited for this study. This challenge was prompted by the fact that Don Mattera is not only a black Muslim subject: he is also an accomplished poet, creative writer, journalist and activist. Thus, the concern was what mode of enquiry and method would be adequate to offer a comprehensive reading of Mattera's sense of self, person and subjectivity. It was this concern that finally led the study to settle for black/Africana existential thought and philosophy as a conceptual and theoretical approach to anchor the dissertation. This is because black/Africana existential philosophy and thought as articulated by its main exponents like Lewis Gordon and Mabogo More is understood as 'an intertextually embedded discursive practice' (Gordon 2000: 8; More 2008:46). Accordingly, my method has entailed reading Don Mattera within the context of what Gordon has described as the 'poeticist-humanist' category within Africana existential philosophy and thought (2008: 195). However, engaging work on black/Africana existential philosophy and thought,

demanding, in the light of the study on Don Mattera, not only a critique but also a need to expand the discursive concerns of this intellectual tradition. This helped to set the context for the subsequent chapters namely Four, Five and Six, which constituted the locus of where the argument advanced in this study was pursued.

Discussion of Content and This Study's Contribution

Beginning with Chapter Four and taking Mattera's poetry as its data through an intertextual reading, this chapter has challenged the conventional reading of Mattera's poetry through the lenses of 'a literature of protest' and 'combat'. Without denying the political tenor in some of Mattera's poetry, the chapter has argued for an alternative reading of Mattera's poetry that is attentive to his 'complexity' as a poet. Besides themes of protest and struggle, the chapter maintained Mattera's poetry was not limited to such mundane themes but has a layer that transcends them. Eschewing a piecemeal reading of Mattera that focuses on only one collection of his poetry, the chapter adopted a reading strategy that read Mattera focussing on most of his anthologies. By reading Mattera comprehensively, the chapter has shown that while political themes are present in both his early and later poetry, his larger poetic output together extends beyond these themes. I identified compassion and transcendence as recurring themes that underwrites his complexity of vision as a poet.

By complexity of vision, my reference is to the dialectic that is at once specific and refers to the poet's sense of place and location, yet, remains universal and transcends the immediacy of time and context. For example, while there are poems that touch on black suffering and dehumanisation, these poems do not demonise but uphold the humanity of the perpetrators of such injustice. I have interpreted this as the quest for horizontal transcendence with a desire to transcend human barriers. 'See and Sand' among other poems discussed,

signified such a poetic impulse. However, besides horizontal transcendence, Mattera's poetry, also, intimates towards the metaphysical and vertical transcendence. Taking the example of *Azanian Love Song*, a work considered the hymn of liberation, the chapter identified poems that make direct references to the Divine. Mattera's poems like 'Man to man with God', and discussed in detail, the chapter argued, captures intimation toward vertical transcendence in his poetry. It argued that such poems represent what Hutch has termed 'implicit religiosity', and hence debunk the image of a poet of protest and combat.

To eschew a reductionist reading of Mattera as a poet and creative writer, Chapter Five was juxtaposed against Chapter Four and focussed on Mattera's fiction based on a collection of his short stories, *The Storyteller*. While accepting that Mattera's creative writing, like that of his contemporaries, like Es'kia Mphahlele is underpinned by the political background of apartheid, and hence on the surface is stubbornly political, a critical examination of the narratives and content of Mattera's stories showed that they possess a transcendental quality similar to his poetry. In the context of his fiction, which is more overtly political than his poetry, the chapter has observed how Mattera's usage of paradox mitigates the burden of the political that surrounds the universe of his fictional characters. To avoid a limiting aesthetic evaluation of Mattera's fiction, the chapter called for a reading that seizes on the paradoxical instances that characterise the universe of Mattera's characters. While the stories emerge in an undeniably political context, the paradox is that Mattera's fiction is able to capture the fragile yet complex nature of human relations. In interpreting the contradiction and paradoxical in human relations in an openly racially divided society, Chapter Five has described such everyday life interactions as instances of inter-human transcendence. It argued that Mattera achieves transcendence not by downplaying the political context, but through foregrounding, what the chapter has described as 'the paradox of compassion which enables Mattera's characters to escape the burden of their political situation.'

Furthermore, while *The Storyteller* is not explicitly religious fiction, the chapter argued that religion is implicitly present through the religiosity embodied by Mattera's characters. This view was more explicit in 'Execution', 'Death-follows a Man' and the 'The Uniform.' These stories demonstrate a palpable religiosity that reflects the human side of Mattera's characters. In these stories, though political, the characters are depicted as vulnerable and with a keen desire to escape or transcend apartheid divisions and alterities. Hence, the chapter concluded that Mattera's fiction in *The Storyteller* could be read, also, through a hermeneutic and aesthetic evaluation that is open to notions of transcendence.

Unlike the previous chapters, Chapter Six sought to extend the focus of the dissertation by reading Mattera outside the context of his poetry and fiction. The chapter read Mattera alongside Malcolm X in a non-literary fashion. The conclusion reached in this chapter remained similar, to Chapters Four and Five. Notwithstanding the non-literary focus in Chapter Six, the themes identified, namely transcendence and compassion, persist. Foregrounding Islam and reading Mattera alongside Malcolm X as co-black Muslim subjects who share similar biographies despite their differing contexts, the question of transcendence and inclusive of compassion, has resurfaced. It has resurfaced from the existential point of view of the lived experience of Mattera and Malcolm X as subjects enchanted by or attuned to transcendence in both its vertical and horizontal senses. This observation provided the context to situate the central thesis of this study more firmly.

In particular, Chapter Six has illustrated that to situate Islam as a discursive category is not an arbitrary move but reflective of Mattera's (and, of course, Malcolm X's) embodied experience and sense of self. In short, Islam constitutes their 'facticity' and 'situation' of being in the world, to use Sartrean expressions. Arguably, this manner of reading Mattera does not only complement the literary reading advanced in Chapters Four and Five but also endorses

the conclusions reached in those two chapters. In other words, Chapter Six, even though non-literary, demanded a reversal of the hermeneutic of struggle. It has shown through a careful and self-reflexive reading of black subjectivity that the optic of struggle alone promotes a fossilised position of a subject trapped in protest. Hence, the thesis advanced ultimately in the study is that black/Africana existential thought and philosophy cannot forever remain locked as an oppositional discursive practice. It must be attentive to the demands of a hermeneutic of transcendence as embodied in figures like Mattera, who, though political and ‘icons of struggle’, are more complex than the hermeneutic of struggle encapsulates.

As argued in Chapter Six, while both Mattera and Malcolm X are outspoken champions of what, at times, is clearly a pan-African vision and Black Consciousness affirming black pride and humanity, when the discourse of these two figures is scrutinised, it becomes suspect. It is suspect in the sense that the imperative to articulate an African and black pride soon finds itself muted. In the case of Mattera, for instance, his enthrallment with the idea of compassion, which he maintains is what attracted him to Islam in the first place, is a case in point.⁸⁷ For *compassion*, as pointed out, demands an unconditional embrace of the humanity of the *Other*; hence this would be an embrace of alterity in the intersubjective sense. Mattera’s notion of compassion in the latter sense therefore demands an open acceptance of the racial, ethnic and even religious Other. In short, through compassion, all barriers and divides are *transcended*, and self-transcendence is achieved.

⁸⁷ I have discussed this aspect at length in a self-standing essay on Don Mattera. See author’s article ‘Complex Subjectivities’: Don Omaruddin Mattera’s Conversation to Islam, Beyond a Political Reading and a Biographical Essay.’ *Journal for Islamic Studies*, 34(1), pp. 153–176.

Likewise, Malcolm X's move from the Nation of Islam to 'orthodox Islam' illustrates how the tension between the demands of black solidarity and the need to transcend race-based solidarities and identities is possible. As Marable has indicated, the embrace of universal Islam and its ethos implied that Malcolm had to abandon all forms of 'bigotry' and racial pride: 'As Malcolm learned more about orthodox Islam, he became determined to propagate the meaning of the faith to audiences regardless of race' (Marable 2011: 486). Therefore, in the context of Chapter Six, it was argued that both Mattera and Malcolm X embody, to use Don Mattera's words, '*the* story of transcendence'. However, transcendence as used here is not limited to transcendence in the Sartrean existential sense of a subject 'that is constituted *outwardly* by its engagement' or in the real world of interhuman action and relationships (Fox 2003: 16). This is because the latter view of transcendence, though present, would be limited. As figures of transcendence, Mattera and Malcolm X can, also, be better viewed in the Levinasian and Kierkegaardian sense of subjects who are able to find existence 'outside existence' – in other words, through openness to vertical transcendence.⁸⁸ It is in this dialectical sense that Mattera's iteration as 'the story of transcendence', which is also representative of Malcolm's position, can be better appreciated.

Discursive Rupture with Conventional black/Africana Existential Philosophy and Thought

Why did God spare me among so many? And why did I find deeper bitterness and fear, and loneliness and alienation in politics that did not exist in the gang warfare of the slum streets? (Mattera 2009 [1987]: 100)

⁸⁸ For detailed discussion on 'the Kierkegaardian subject', I am indebted to Michael O'Neill Burns's discussion of similarities between Alain Badiou or the 'Badioun subject' with Kierkegaard's. See Michael O'Neill Burns's 'Alain Badiou: Thinking the Subject after the Death of God.' In *Kierkegaard's influence on Social-Political Thought*. Edited by Jon Bartley Stewart (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), pp. 41–58.

Because the overall theoretical and conceptual approach was guided by black/Africana existential philosophy, the reading of Mattera presented a discursive rupture within the conventional framing of black/Africana existential philosophy and thought. In other words, the premium that this study has placed on transcendence as captured either in the literary and poetic sensibility of Mattera or in the existential intersubjective sense of Mattera as a black and Muslim subject has demanded a hermeneutic reversal of *how* even black/Africana existential thought and philosophy is conceived. In other words, black/Africana existential thought and philosophy, this study suggests, ought to place the question of transcendence firmly on its discursive agenda. Undoubtedly, questions of oppression, black suffering, exploitation and race matters have not receded. The world continues to be inhumane and ‘anti-Black’, as most black existentialists and Africana philosophers would argue (More 2008; Gordon 1997; Birt 1997; Mills 1997, 1998). Indeed, both Mattera and Malcolm X have addressed themselves to these concerns in their respective ways. Consider Mattera’s interview cited in Chapter Four, for example, where he had the following to say: ‘I lay my poems at the altar of my people’. However, his counterpoint is equally significant: ‘our poetry *must also* give hope; death is not the end’.

To mediate this constant tension – that between the imperatives of the political and the imperative to transcend the materiality of the political – the study has argued in a reading of Mattera’s poetry and fiction, that any reading that elevates an aesthetic evaluation that privileges only a political reading, though correct, can also be misleading. This is because such an evaluation does not offer an accurate reading of Mattera’s poetic and literary output. At worst, it limits his work to its context and historicity and thus robs it of its universal and transcendental character. To note the latter is to neither disown nor sanitise Mattera of his strong black and African cultural leanings, and his political commitment in his literary work

and public activist engagements. Rather, it is to say that such cultural and political leanings are also laced with a transcendental and universal sensibility. Hence, the study has proposed a hermeneutic of transcendence. This notion has been applied to reading Mattera the person and not just Mattera the creative writer.

The conclusion reached in this study finds resonance, as shown in Chapter Six in Victor Anderson's work *Beyond Ontological Blackness* (1995), which is a work that is critical of what Anderson has termed the 'classical black aesthetic' (1995:160). Anderson has ventured to advocate an alternative aesthetic that is attentive to all the complexities and diverse experiences that make up black life. While Anderson's project is saddled with mostly theological concerns and a desire to find 'an African American public theology that goes beyond black crisis and existential theology' (Anderson 1995: 161), this study is different. Unashamedly, the focus here is on individual subjectivity, sense of self and self-formation. As such, it registers a methodological difference from Anderson's work and similar projects. On another level, Jackson has commented at length on Anderson's *Beyond Ontological Blackness* for being unwittingly trapped in the 'false universal' of whiteness as the norm against which forms of black cultural fulfilment must be weighed. Hence, Jackson (2009) finds that the fault line in Anderson's project is its failure to engage with the unquestioned ontology of whiteness.⁸⁹

Jackson's critique finds extensive support in the work of Charles Mills, where, at the risk of a caricature of Mills's otherwise extensive treatment of what he terms 'white ontology', he questions the lack 'of any philosophical narrative' that theorises in detail 'the centrality of race' and, more especially, the normative power of 'whiteness' as an unproblematic universal.

⁸⁹ For an extensive critique of Victor Anderson, see also, Lewis Gordon, *Existential Africana*, pp. 145 – 152.

Mills has covered this form of critique extensively in his works *The Racial Contract* (1997), *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (1998) and, to an extent, *From Class to Race: Essays in White Marxism and Black Radicalism* (2003). Reference to his work is merely to illustrate that objections raised by Jackson in particular, are not based on a superficial objection to Anderson's thesis but are quite complex.

As hinted, notwithstanding Jackson's sharp critique of Anderson, while Islam does not feature in Anderson's work, the reading here of Mattera and Malcolm X is close to Anderson's demand for a more inclusive account of black cultural experiences. The caveat is that the Islamic attachment to black and African identity is not a misfit. If Mattera and Malcolm X's sense of self and subjectivity is taken seriously, then Islam in terms of their self-understanding is a central or constituent part of their sense of being, consciousness and place in the world. Put differently, Islam represents in the lives of these figures an instance or a moment of transcending the static ontology of blackness. However, this is not as a denial of racial belonging or as a desire to kill one's roots in the black experience. Malcolm X and Don Mattera in their pilgrimage to Islam, or *hijra* as described by Mattera, are more than black or African subjects: they are subjects who have embraced a universal mode of identity and consciousness. Accordingly, they are no longer trapped by ancestry, history and place. In Islam Mattera and Malcolm X have embraced an identity that is 'disrupted' (to use Sealey's expression) by encounters with the alterity and openness that external traditions impose on the black subject. However, unlike Sealey, who insists on the fragmented nature of black identity, the argument pursued here is that Islam does not represent in the life of Mattera and Malcolm a moment of disruption and fracture; rather, it is embedded in and is hence a critical component of their black and African 'cultural experience', sense of self and subjectivity.

To use the language of the Senegalese philosopher, Bachir Diagne, Islam entails ‘a new self-reappraisal’ of the black and African subject (Diagne 2008: 21). And it is precisely in negotiating what this ‘new self-reappraisal’ implies that there is often a dialectical tension with the demands of an identity shot initially through black and African pride and solidarity with one that is now alert to the demands of a universal identity that transcends race, ethnicity and place. But if this is the case – and it is argued here that this is the case, at least in the context of Mattera and Malcolm X – then, by inference, black/Africana existential thought and philosophy cannot remain blind to the Islamic experience among black subjects. Factoring in Islam means that the identities and subjectivities of Mattera and Malcolm are also shaped by an ontology that trumps the materiality of the political with an enchantment to vertical transcendence. To exist therefore in the latter sense is not only to be a subject of protest; on the contrary, it also entails a subject who is subordinate to vertical transcendence.

The conventional framing of black/Africana existential thought and philosophy as a ‘philosophy of protest’, though understandable, has fostered an epistemic closure of its own by elevating the political and hence limiting black subjectivity to a subject locked in protest. This tyranny of the political is interpreted in the context of this study as foreclosing a hermeneutic of transcendence. The latter hermeneutic, the study maintains, provides a better reading and interpretation of Don Mattera in regard to both the context of his creative writing and real life situations beyond his literary aesthetics. Accordingly, through a hermeneutic that foregrounds transcendence, Mattera’s sense of self and subjectivity is understood not only through negativity as ‘a counter discursive’ or protesting subject but also as a ‘complex’ and transcendent subjectivity. In other words, it is not a static self and by inference subjectivity; rather, it is open to other modes of being and perceiving of itself and its place in the world beyond struggle and protest.

To foreground transcendence in its expansive sense in the quest to interpret Don Mattera, this study has explored the possibility of an enriching critique of black subjectivity and, by inference, black/Africana existential thought and philosophy beyond its conventional discursive concerns that have until now privileged the hermeneutics of protest, struggle, and an ontology perceived through race consciousness alone. To say this, though, should not be confused with arguments that claim Black Consciousness has lost its relevance. On the contrary, as both Rozena Maart and Rico Settler in a symposium on ‘What is Africanism? What is Black Consciousness?’ have argued, with the politics of self-representation and identity in a place like South Africa returning with a vengeance, the relevance of Black Consciousness thinking, not so much as an ‘anti-white oppositional discourse’, remains relevant (Settler 2014).⁹⁰ Admittedly, the subjects and data of this study, although amenable to the latter reading and its privileged hermeneutic of protest, are, nevertheless, open to a self that is not only political but which is equally also spiritual and therefore enchanted with the transcendent. To advance this view is not to deny either ‘the sociality of the self’ or that the self is, for that matter, by definition political, as most black and African thinkers such as Okot p’Bitek would insist (1998: 73–74). Rather, it is to caution against the valorisation of the political subject or self, which provides a distorted view of black subjectivity, sense of self and mode of being in the world. Without denying that the self is also political, Mattera and Malcolm X, as Muslim subjects, simultaneously embody a self that transcends the political self.

Admittedly, while political, Mattera and Malcolm X embody a self that transcends the political self and subject. Through their encounter with Islam, Mattera and Malcolm X are also,

⁹⁰ From personal research files and notes taken at an event organised by *BantuBonke Caucus*, ‘What is Africanism? What is Black Consciousness? 22 August 2014, UKZN, Pietermaritzburg campus.

in an existential sense, subjects who have transcended the political and are hence open to an alterity beyond the political. In other words, their subjectivity represents a self that is also in affinity with ‘the transcendence exemplified in the Qur’an’, to borrow a phrase from Tayob (2003 [1999]: 160). While Tayob was referring to Muslims in general, his assertion that ‘each symbolic appropriation of Islam’ represent ‘a station’ and ‘a goal on [a] religious quest which must be transcended on the journey to the Ultimate,’ can be applied to Mattera and Malcolm X’s turn to Islam (2003 [1999]: 160). As noted in Chapter Six, in Mattera’s spiritual odyssey in particular, the spiritual quest is best reflected in Mattera’s enchantment with the Qur’anic notion of compassion. It was Islam’s articulation of compassion that served as the catalyst for Mattera’s conversion to Islam and not, as I have argued elsewhere, the rhetoric of political Islam.⁹¹ Inarguably, Mattera’s enchantment with compassion becomes another instance of transcendence in both the Sartrean sense of inter-subjectivity and the Levinasian sense of transcendence toward the beyond and metaphysical.⁹²

Likewise, Malcolm X’s spiritual journey and sensibility is eloquently captured by his acknowledgement of his sense of fallibility, as he concludes in his autobiography: ‘And if I die having brought any light, having exposed any meaningful truth [...] then all of the credit is due to Allah. Only the mistakes have been mine’ (1964: 388; also quoted in Samory Rashid 1993: 63). The deference to Allah is reflective of a subjectivity that is, while political, conscious of a

⁹¹ See essay on Mattera, ‘Complex Subjectivities’, *Journal for Islamic Studies*, 2014.

⁹² For a detailed discussion of Sartre and Levinas’s notions of transcendence, see Kris Sealey, *Moments of Disruption: Levinas, Sartre and the Question of Transcendence* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013).

transcendence that is beyond the ‘immediate’ and ‘everyday life’ (Lachs 1997: 247). Hence, the argument pursued here questions the limitation that exists in the discursive privileging of the black subject and, by inference, black subjectivity in exclusively political terms or a hermeneutic of struggle.

Possible Limitation

A possible limitation in this study concerns the neglect of some engagement or reference to other black African Muslim intellectuals or literary figures. While a motivation was given for focussing on Mattera and later interpret him with Malcolm X, the study would have benefited further with additional attention to other African Muslim intellectuals or writers. Chapter Five has made cursory remarks to Islam in the context of West African literature; however, it did not attempt to discuss such literature alongside Mattera’s fiction. Considering how Islam has received sustained treatment in the Western African or Eastern African literary imagination and intellectual traditions, engagement with such literature and figures might have given the study more comparative scope. My reservations though, is that such an undertaking would comprise the dissertation’s distinctive objective which was to pursue an in depth study of Don Mattera without the burden of additional comparative case studies.

Concluding Remarks

As far as I am aware, this study represents the first initiative to study Don Mattera in such a comprehensive way. Taking Mattera as the study’s primary focus, the dissertation has sketched a picture that defies standard interpretations of Don Mattera and his work as mainly subjects to be engaged with through a political reading and the lenses of protest. Accordingly, this study represents a hermeneutic reversal of the conventional reading of Mattera, which has to date

framed him as a subject locked in protest. I have arrived at this interpretation through a critical reading of Don Mattera as a poet, creative writer and activist without expunging his sense of being a Muslim. Reference to ‘Muslim’ and, by inference, ‘Islam’ in this study is not so much in the context of Islam as something of a cultural aberration to blackness and black subjectivity but rather as a critical component of Don Mattera’s embodied experience and sense of self. Hence, Mattera is also read alongside Malcolm X to give the study a comparative twist. I have argued that even though Black Consciousness and Africanist pride influence Don Mattera in his thought and poetic vision, his vision is not limited to Black Consciousness and Africanist ideals alone. On the contrary, a critical reading of Mattera reflects a transcendental and a humanist consciousness that transcends raced based identities or ‘ontological blackness’ (Anderson 1995:11). More than a project unearthing the content of Mattera’s thought, poetic vision and literary achievements, the dissertation’s epistemological thrust rests also on how it foregrounds Islam as a critical factor in black and African subjectivities. Thus, the dissertation title is conceptualised in part as ‘Africana/Islamica Existential Thought’ to underscore the need to expand the discursive concerns within Africana existential thought and philosophy.

As noted, my method entailed an inter-disciplinary approach where Mattera is read in the context of what Gordon has termed the ‘poeticist-humanist’ category within Africana existential philosophy. In doing so, I have challenged the conventional logic and self-understanding of Africana existential thought for its valorisation of strictly political categories and black subjectivities that find meaning only in protest. In this regard, the study calls for a self-reflexive account of black subjectivity as an intra-critical engagement beyond dominant accounts of the black subject. Hence, Chapter Six has called to attention the place of Islam in black and African sense of self as reflected through Mattera, and to some extent Malcolm X. It argued that the black and African self in the context of Mattera and Malcolm X are not unidimensional subjects but represent a ‘complex subjectivity’ and by inference transcendental

self. Thus, the conclusion that black/Africana existential thought and philosophy cannot remain forever locked as a counter and oppositional discursive practice; it must also be attentive to a hermeneutic of transcendence. The latter hermeneutic, this study has concluded, provides a more enriching interpretation for subjects like Mattera than the hermeneutic of struggle and protest allows.

A hermeneutic of transcendence demands reimagining the past and present not only through the captivity of political categories, memory of suffering and a valorisation of struggle but through transcending such categories and modes of interpretation. By paying close attention to the question of transcendence and its different permutations as reflected in Don Mattera's poetry, fiction, and self-understanding, it is hoped that this study has provided some insight into the possibility of reconfiguring and deepening the discursive concerns within black/Africana existential thought and philosophy beyond the familiar themes of protest and struggle. Mattera's enchantment with compassion as reflected in his poetry, fiction and self-understanding, I have concluded represent another variant of transcendence in both Sartrean sense of inter-subjective transcendence and Levinasian sense of transcendence as a gesture toward the beyond and metaphysical.

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