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Out of Africa: Nat Nakasa's Exit Paperwork

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This article explores the literary imagination that emerged around the paperwork of the South African apartheid state, especially the bureaucratic ephemera—such as *dompasses*, passports, passport applications and exit permits—that limited the free movement of black individuals. It turns to the case of the South African journalist Nat Nakasa (1937–1965). In a first step, I argue that, in Nakasa's writings, apartheid's bureaucratic papers are viewed as material curiosities in order to critique the ironic gap between their artificial nature and the hold they had over individual, predominantly black lives. Then I examine how, after Nakasa's death in exile, the little magazine he founded, the *Classic*, dedicated a memorial issue to the journalist, republishing his writings on, as well as preserving his own engagements with, the state's bureaucratic ephemera. Its ephemeral nature made the little magazine a fitting counter-archive of apartheid. As I go on to argue, the *Classic* registered in its fragile material form a sense of the regime's bureaucratic violence—becoming, in turn, a material curiosity from the mid-apartheid years—and yet it persisted against these odds, and was kept and archived. Such a reading aims to throw the political affordances of the magazine's ephemerality into relief.

Introduction

This article examines the literary imagination that emerged around the paperwork of the South African apartheid state, especially the bureaucratic ephemera—such as *dompasses*, passports, passport applications and exit permits—that stood between a black individual and free movement. Such an examination may appear surprising, given that extensive movement has always been a major prompt for modern literature, as well as one of its defining themes, and given that movement control, as Jesper Guldall (2015) argues, has consequently been considered 'anti-narrative' (141). However, in a place such as mid-20th-century South Africa, it was precisely the lack of movement, a restriction symptomatic of larger political issues, that provided the impulse for writing, often in protest. The South African journalist Nat Nakasa is a case in point: his subversive pieces from the late 1950s and early 1960s, published in black and white-liberal venues such as *Drum* and the *Rand Daily Mail*, pivot around encounters with the paperwork of the state, including his own. Following Nakasa's death in exile in 1965, these pieces were anthologized in a memorial issue of the *Classic*, the little magazine that Nakasa had founded and that paradoxically developed, as I argue here, into a counter-archive of apartheid. To date, there is little scholarship dedicated exclusively to Nat Nakasa, and the few studies that exist either take biographical and historical approaches to his writings (Brown, 2013; Marais, 2016) or zero in on his tenure as editor of the *Classic*, especially in the context of CIA involvement during the Cold War (Davis, 2020). My aim is to situate Nakasa more explicitly in the fields of book and publishing history by recovering his little-known interest in the materiality of documents (from bureaucratic ephemera to little magazines) as a site for the articulation of an anti-apartheid politics.

While the European cultural canon has been studied in light of modernity's bureaucratic impulses, from Franz Kafka's *The Castle* and Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* to Edgar Degas's 'Bureau Pictures', the loss of agency in the face of administrative procedures—which prompted Max Weber (1978) to define bureaucracy as a machine-like 'structure of domination' (998)—was never an exclusively European experience. Across Sub-Saharan Africa, colonisation and the rise of the bureaucratic state were concomitant, entangled phenomena, each constituting structures of domination in their own right and each producing a proliferation of paperwork. While literacy levels may have been lower than in Europe, the encounter with red tape at the time surpassed mere reading to encompass, as Priyasha Mukhopadhyay has argued, other forms of engagement, such as safekeeping or carrying around, which threw the material forms of these documents into sharp relief. Any kind of text, including bureaucratic *paperasse*, may 'enter human lives and relationships in ways that are not necessarily contingent on their being read' (Mukhopadhyay, 2015: 61–2). Late colonial and early post-colonial

subjects, whether literate or not, were governed through the material practices and artefacts of writing. Across the continent, writing and power were closely intertwined. In the Kasai, in colonial Congo, for instance, literate Congolese were referred to as *bena mukanda*—the children of paperwork (Monaville, 2022: 31). Kenya under British rule witnessed the implementation of the *kipande* system, which required Kenyans to carry an identity document on their person, without which they were not allowed to move freely. The pass system in apartheid South Africa is the culmination of such a project, stretched to its virtual breaking point.

The paperwork of the apartheid state was ephemeral in the sense that it was thrown out after it had served its purpose. Pass application forms were filed away, then forgotten; once expired, passbooks and passports, too, were meant to be destroyed. In this way, these documents constituted a form of violence that often remains historically illegible. As Ben Kafka (2009) reminds us, scholars have made ample use of bureaucratic ephemera as sources for the writing of history rather than as sources with their own histories: we have looked *through* paperwork, not *at* it (341). To write about these ephemera—like Nakasa, to scrutinise their specific forms, material qualities and uses—meant to put this violence on record. In Nakasa's journalism, as I argue, the passbooks, passports and exit permits of apartheid South Africa emerge as *curiosities*, that is, as objects, often small or intricate, that have a certain interest because of their novelty or strangeness. For the journalist, the curiosity lay in the material contours and artificial registers of these documents: to think of them as odd was to critique the ironic gap between their curious, artificial nature and the hold they had over individual, predominantly black lives. In a second step, I illustrate how, after Nakasa's own refusal of a passport, his subsequent departure on an exit permit and his death in exile, the *Classic*, his Johannesburg little magazine, dedicated a memorial issue to the journalist, which archived Nakasa's writings on and engagements with the state's bureaucratic ephemera. Censored, poorly printed and appearing after long delays, this little magazine became, like the *dompasses* and passport applications it stored, an ephemeral material artefact curiously shaped by its political surroundings. Magazines were insubstantial, throwaway, dated forms; like passports, they, too, expired. And yet, in persisting despite the death of its founding editor, the *Classic* reclaimed something of its ephemeral nature as a statement against power. This affective purchase, I argue more broadly, made the little magazine a fitting counter-archive of apartheid—an alternative site that challenged the state's narrative record, in this case preserving and countering in its fragile material form a sense of the regime's bureaucratic violence. In making this case, I gesture beyond Nakasa to a wider literary landscape, circling around key writers of the period, including Nadine Gordimer, Lewis Nkosi, Doris Lessing,

Chinua Achebe, William Plomer and Richard Rive, in order to suggest that a creative, subversive engagement with the ephemera of the state sits as one of the defining motifs in the postcolonial canon.

Writing the Pass after Sharpeville

Under apartheid, black South Africans, like Nat Nakasa, were required by law to carry a reference book on their person—also called a *dompas* or *bewysboek*—which outlined where they were allowed to live, move around and work.[1] '[M]ore than anything else', Keith Breckenridge (2005) contends, the reference book 'defined the essence of life in Apartheid South Africa' (83). In the decade between 1952 and 1962, the years surrounding Nakasa's arrival on the literary scene, 274,000 pass law violations were recorded each year, leading to more than three million convictions (Brown, 2013: 28). By the middle of 1962, monthly arrests averaged as high as 49,000 (Breckenridge, 2005: 101). 'If you leave your passbook in your jacket in the office and cross the street to buy a cold drink', the writer and journalist Lewis Nkosi (1983), Nakasa's childhood friend, observed, 'you run the risk of being shanghaied to jail without any means of communicating with the outside. The result may be imprisonment for a period of up to six months' (27).

One of Nakasa's initial encounters with the state's bureaucracy came, as it did for many, at an early age. If a glimpse of his application for a reference book at the Bantu Affairs Department in Durban in 1955 has been preserved in the historical record, it was because he struck up a conversation with the clerk, Theo Zindela, who invited him to a game of ping-pong at the local YMCA and, thirty-five years later, wrote a short pamphlet about Nakasa's early years in Durban. Nakasa, Zindela and Nkosi became fast friends, setting up the Chesterville Cultural Club in their township and getting their start in journalism at *Ilanga Lase Natal*, a newspaper for the black elite in and around Durban.[2] Before long, Nkosi and Nakasa were hired at the Durban office of *Drum*, the widely successful magazine targeting a black urban readership, and from there, in 1957, moved on to the Johannesburg office. So central was *Drum* to the cultural scene at the time that the magazine and its cast of reporters—Can Themba, Arthur Maimane, Casey Motsisi, Es'kia Mphahlele, Henry Nxumalo—became synonymous with the 1950s in South African letters, the '*Drum* decade' (Driver, 2012: 387).[3] In the pages of this

[1] The scholarship on the pass laws, their emergence and their place in the wider history of administrative control in South Africa is extensive (O'Meara, 1996; Evans, 1997; Breckenridge 2014). The representation of this system in literature is less explicitly discussed; it centres mostly around the Sharpeville Massacre (Mzamane, 1985).

[2] Journalism was a Nakasa family trade. Nakasa's father, a regular columnist for *Ilanga Lase Natal* and a longtime contributor to *Indian Views*, had regularly taken Nakasa to the *Indian Views*' editorial office to help set the type (Brown, 2013: 24). As a small boy, he would sell the morning newspapers in the streets.

[3] While scholarship on Nakasa is sparse, his immediate environment—the *Drum* and *Sophiatown* generations—has

magazine, Nakasa made a name for himself, later becoming the first black journalist to have a Saturday column in the *Rand Daily Mail*, the city's white-liberal newspaper: 'As I See It, by Nat Nakasa'.

As a reporter, one of Nakasa's topics was apartheid's pass laws, which were enforced through the material artefacts of the bureaucratic state. In 'So, They Were Impressed?', published in the *Rand Daily Mail* on 11 July 1964, he gave an account of the official visit to Johannesburg of 29 chiefs from Southern Rhodesia. Despite an itinerary created by government representatives, these men were free to explore on their own: 'Nobody', Nakasa wondered (1964c), 'had ever told the Rhodesian officials that the "foreign Natives" go to jail and get deported if they are found without the correct identity papers in the streets of impressive South Africa' (9). 'The Hazards of Too Much Education', printed in the same newspaper on 16 May 1964, introduced a black man whose education, an MA in Psychology, had become a 'liability' and a 'cause of constant frustration' (Nakasa, 1964b: 11). When he was refused a passport to travel for business, his public relations firm hired 'a more passportable, though less educated man' (11). Elsewhere, a similar scenario unfolded: Nakasa's educated friend was dismissed because his employers read the state's refusal as a sign of sinister past behaviour. 'I keep telling him', Nakasa reported facetiously:

> he should never have allowed himself to become so highly educated. Without all these degrees he could slip quietly into a pass office job and have himself a ball stamping reference books. But he insists that he is a trained psychologist and wants to work as one. This week, he received a telegram from Ibadan University, offering to pay all expenses if he would fly to Nigeria for an interview. There is a job there for a research fellow. Only officialdom knows whether he will go for this interview or not. As an 'educated Bantu' he may be required to stay and keep the home fires burning in the Republic. (11)

This is, in Nakasa's words, 'impressive South Africa'. Irony serves as the guiding principle in these pieces of bureaucratic realism.

Often rehearsed, such irony is the mark of Nakasa's dissent: his writings stage encounters with the passbooks and passports of the apartheid state to point out the inherent absurdity of these bureaucratic inventions. If irony was such a common motif—Lewis Nkosi (1983) likewise termed apartheid 'an exercise in the absurd'

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been the subject of extensive critical examination (Switzer, 1997; Chapman, 2001; Driver 2012). Many of the people involved at *Drum* published their reminiscences, in which Nakasa often features (Sampson, 1956; Nkosi, 1983; Hopkinson, 1984).

(27)—it was because a flat-out condemnation, published in venues such as *Drum* or the *Rand Daily Mail*, which were heavily monitored by the state, would have been censored and might have led the periodical to be banned (which is what ultimately happened in 1965 to *Drum* and in 1985 to the *Rand Daily Mail*). Nakasa's form of budding dissent had emerged out of a charged political moment. In March 1960, protesters had burned their passbooks at the Sharpeville police station: 69 people were killed and at least 180 injured. In the wake of what came to be known as the Sharpeville Massacre, waves of unrest reverberated throughout South Africa, though the heavily censored press could barely reflect this uproar. As Ryan Brown (2013) noted, the first issue of *Drum* to go to press after the massacre, in May 1960, carried only a photographic spread of the victims' funerals (80).

Still, Sharpeville brought renewed attention from the outside world, opening up a space for critical discourse. The *New York Times* solicited an article from Nakasa, 'The Human Meaning of Apartheid', which appeared in the 24 September 1961 issue. Centrally positioned on the page is an image of two black South Africans stopped in the street to have their passes examined. The caption reads: 'WAAR IS JOU PASS?'. The article provides further context to this scene by introducing Johannes Oliphant, who had been sentenced to prison for entering Durban without a pass in order to look for a job. '[T]he Africans are controlled by a vast machinery of Government documents called passes' (42), Nakasa (1961) explains to American readers:

> Without a pass, the African is as vulnerable as a criminal on the run. He is required by law to produce it at any time of the day or night if a policeman wants to see it. It is depressing to watch policemen stop Africans at street corners to inspect their passes. '*Hey wena, kom hier!* [Hey you, come here!]' a policeman barks. The man stops dead on the pavement. His body goes numb as he sees the brown uniform and police boots shining. '*Waar is jou pass?* [Where is your pass?]' the policeman asks. The man stands still and silent. Only his hands fumble instinctively with his pockets. He hasn't got the pass on him. 'I left it at home, *baas*, in my other jacket', he says. '*Jy lieg*, you're lying, come over here!' The white policeman seizes him by the neck of his jacket and orders him to join the other prisoners leaning against a wall. In due course, an African constable comes to handcuff the new prisoner and search his pockets for dangerous weapons. This ritual involves fumbling with the prisoner's waist and socks. (42)

For Nakasa, 'the pass system is the cornerstone of apartheid' (42), the material artefact of a state bureaucracy around which relentless violence was orchestrated and which

became a focal point for dissent. With trademark irony, his *New York Times* debut compares the passbook to 'a pocket testament' (42)—weighty in more ways than one—thus inadvertently bearing out Pierre Bourdieu's (1994) claim that, through its piles of papers, the modern state wields 'a genuinely creative, quasi-divide, power' (12).

Passport Applications in the *Rand Daily Mail*

In his weekly column in the *Rand Daily Mail*, Nat Nakasa turned to his defining engagement with the paperwork of the apartheid state: his application for an international passport. In September 1963, Tony Schulte, a publisher at Simon & Schuster in New York, suggested in a letter that the journalist apply for a Nieman fellowship to study at Harvard, provided he could get a permit from the government. Nakasa was keen and adamant he would get a visa because, while a political writer, he had never been active in politics. 'I'm sure to find some way of getting out of here', he replied confidently, 'It is not all that difficult' (Naksa, 1963e: n.p.). In fact, he was already in the process of applying for a British Council grant to travel to London at the invitation of Dan Jacobson and Laurens Van der Post—'if officialdom favours me with that wretched little document the passport', he specified (Nakasa, 1963d: n.p.). Nothing likely came of this visit, for reasons the record does not reflect. However, with renewed vigour, in early 1964, the reporter submitted his application to Harvard, which comprised a portfolio of his *Drum* and *Rand Daily Mail* pieces, his *New York Times* debut and recommendations by Nadine Gordimer, the novelist, and Helen Suzman, the only politician in parliament to explicitly oppose apartheid. Many were in the process of leaving via the academic route, or had already gone. Lewis Nkosi left South Africa on a Nieman fellowship to Harvard in 1961 (Nakasa had even accompanied him to the airport); Richard Rive was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to study at Columbia in 1965. 'I am going overseas—by the front door, Professor', Nadine Gordimer wrote a friend about her brief flight from apartheid in the summer of 1964 (n.p.).

Nakasa's Harvard application was successful and, in 'Castles in the Air', published in the *Rand Daily Mail* on 11 April 1964, he reflected on the subsequent process of applying for a passport to travel internationally—the first in a series of short articles on the topic that could reliably be categorised as what Nadine Gordimer (1966a) termed 'escape' literature (8). The outcome of emigration procedure in apartheid South Africa, Karin Shapiro has illustrated, was difficult to predict in advance as applications were decided on a case-by-case basis. The policy was 'arbitrary, secretive and dismissive of due process' (Shapiro, 2016: 767). 'I have just been to the Bantu Affairs Commissioner's Office to apply for a passport', Nakasa alerted his readers in the *Rand Daily Mail*:

> And that's enough to wipe off any smile that might have been developing on my face. The young White clerk stared through me and said: 'What do you want?' I told him I wanted passport application forms. 'What?' 'The passport forms. I want to go to America.' 'Where?' 'America.' After this conversation the clerk fished out two forms and warned me to fill in and return them as soon as possible. 'You people like to come here at the last minute and expect everything to be done for you quickly,' he said. I mumbled some protest and walked out. (1964a: 11)

The encounter with the passport application forms rests, as it did with the passbook, on a power imbalance, a loss of agency marked by a white clerk 'star[ing] through' the black applicant. Filling out paperwork may seem like a banal experience, but, as Barbara Hochman (2018) has argued, 'a routine request to state "Name in full", "Nationality of mother", or "Place of birth" has significance for one candidate that it does not have for the next' (1173). Here, too, such questions served to underline Nakasa's marginal position as a black in man in the apartheid bureaucracy.

The failure of communication at the Bantu Affairs Commissioner's Office is indicative of the power imbalance at work in this scene. The white clerk's brief, brusque questions—'What?', 'Where?'—are further reinforced through the official language of the application document itself. 'I have now read the forms', Nakasa (1964a) reported in the *Rand Daily Mail*, after closer examination, and went on to quote their legal language: 'You are advised not to finalise any travel arrangements' and 'a South African passport may be granted by the Minister of the Interior at his discretion' (11). Nakasa must have been drawn to this legalese for its striking discrepancy with life—the polite, formal discourse masking the violent realities implied within it. In the *New York Times*, too, the journalist tested the state's official diction against reality, rummaging through 'masses of brochures' produced by the State Information Office and juxtaposing a government statement's definition of apartheid as 'the separate, orderly and systematic development of the European and Bantu, each in his own respective, geopolitical homeland' with the massacre of black South Africans at Sharpeville (Nakasa, 1961: 42). Nakasa's careful examination reveals these documents to be material curiosities—fabricated artefacts whose irony lies precisely in the fact that, while artificial, they played such a significant role in shaping individual lives, including his own. We see this fascination with the odd materiality of state documents across the canon. Like Nakasa, the South African poet Arthur Nortje (1971) turned his visa application into the occasion for a poem, 'Song for a Passport', which scrutinises the document's intricate materiality: 'dull green voucher', 'shiny photograph', 'gold lettering endorsing many travels', 'firm as leather' (111). The Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, in turn, was struck by the immigration

forms he was asked to fill out on landing in Nairobi in 1960: 'After your name you had to define yourself more fully by filling in one of four boxes: European, Asiatic, Arab, Other!' (quoted in Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 1997: 79). Finding the experience 'almost funny', Achebe took the forms home 'as a souvenir' (79).

By early September, Nakasa's passport application had been officially rejected—one out of 443 rejections in 1964 (Shapiro, 2016: 767). While not disclosed at the time, the motive can be deemed from confidential government documents: his journalism in *Drum* and the *Rand Daily Mail* was described by officials in the Police Office and Chief Bantu Commissioner's Office as 'anti-white' and 'anti-government', causing anxiety about the kind of narrative of the regime he might spread abroad (Shapiro, 2016: 774). Nakasa's response, 'A Native of Nowhere', which was printed in the *Rand Daily Mail* on 19 September 1964 and quickly became a defining text in the anti-apartheid canon, documents the implications of that decision, a reluctant resolution to quit South Africa on an exit permit (thus forfeiting his citizenship and barring him, under the 1955 Departure from the Union Regulation Act, from returning). 'Some time next week, with my exit permit in my bag', the piece begins, 'I shall cross the borders of the Republic and immediately part company with my South African citizenship', adding 'I shall become a stateless person, a wanderer':

> According to reliable sources, I shall be classed as a prohibited immigrant if I ever try to return to South Africa. What this means is that self-confessed Europeans are in a position to declare me, an African, a prohibited immigrant, bang on African soil. Nothing intrigues me more. [...] Once out I shall apparently become a stateless person, a wanderer, unless I can find a country to take me in. And that is what I have been trying to achieve in the past few days. I cannot enter America on an exit permit even though I have a scholarship to take up in that country. The Americans will let me in only on a valid passport from a country that is prepared to have me when I leave America. (Nakasa, 1964d: 9)

Once again Nakasa adopts, for the purposes of satire, the language of the state's bureaucracy ('exit permit', 'prohibited immigrant'), weighing the ironic implications of such paper constructs against the realities of his own life on the brink of exile: 'me, an African, a prohibited immigrant, bang on African soil'. The situation, he found, took on absurd proportions.

Like others before and after him—Es'kia Mphahlele in 1957, Bloke Modisane in 1959, Lewis Nkosi in 1960, Keorapetse Kgositsile in 1961, Arthur Nortje in 1964 and Dennis Brutus in 1966—Nakasa left South Africa in exile, propelled, as he acknowledged, by

'a desire to avoid perishing in my own bitterness—a bitterness born of being reduced to a second-class citizen' (9). Travelling with an exit permit, without a passport, was a 'hazardous and exhausting business', as Nakasa (1964e) observed in the *Rand Daily Mail* from New York, where he had arrived by way of Lusaka, Dar es Salaam and London (his expenses paid for in part by the Farfield Foundation) (11). That the exit permit was viewed as a curiosity, much like the passbook and passport application form, is evident from the reaction of British immigration officials at the time, which Lewis Nkosi had recorded a few years earlier: '"Good God, Tim, do come and take a look at this!" And they turned the document from one side to the other, held it up against the light the better to scrutinize it, perhaps even the better to interrogate it for answers which, alas, the document could not yield' (quoted in Shapiro, 2016: 12). Nkosi's description of this scene—two officials inspecting this curious document—makes an ironic mockery of border procedures and, in so doing, puts on record and critiques the violence inherent in the state's bureaucratic ephemera.

Archiving State Ephemera in the *Classic*

On 14 July 1965, with a student visa about to expire, Nat Nakasa died of reported suicide in New York.[4] Before arriving at Harvard, travelling on his exit permit, the journalist had stopped in London and had met Essop 'Joe' Patel, another South African writer in exile, over cups of coffee. 'What happens to the writings of a man when he is dead and gone?' Nakasa had asked Patel (1995: xi). This is what happens: when news of the journalist's death reached Johannesburg, the editorial team at the *Classic* decided to dedicate an issue to their former editor's memory.[5] Nakasa had launched the little magazine in June 1963 and served as its editor for the first three issues. He had proposed the idea for 'a really good, artistic magazine' to a group of friends in a township bar, in Johannesburg, behind a laundry called The Classic, which lent its name to the new venture (Themba, 1995: xviii). In fact, the original idea had come, via Lewis Nkosi, from John 'Jack' Thompson at the Farfield Foundation in New York, which funded key publications across Anglophone Africa—*Black Orpheus* in Ibadan, *New African* in Cape

[4] It was from Thompson's apartment that Nakasa tragically fell to his death. The Farfield Foundation, which Thompson worked for, was a front for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which had covert operations in the cultural space. There were many suspicious deaths that occurred at the time (Williams, 2021: 474).

[5] 'I remember driving around town with Nadine on the day of Nat's death', Barney Simon (1980) recalled, 'talking about him and deciding that the next issue of *The Classic* would be dedicated to his work. So my first solo issue was Nat Nakasa. It contained the best of his writing available then, largely his *Rand Daily Mail* pieces' (77). Can Themba's death in exile inspired a similar project, with contributions by Casey Motsisi, Harry Mashabela, Stanley Motjuwadi and Juby Mayet to a 'Can Remembered' section in *The Classic* (2, no. 4, 1968). G.D. Trevelyan and Lewis Nkosi wrote about Themba's death for *Contrast* and *Transition*, respectively.

Town, *Transition* in Kampala—but which was later revealed to have close ties to the CIA (Popescu, 2020).[6] 'Jack wants to give you guys a small sum of money to help you start a cheap publication', Nkosi, also a Nieman fellow, had written his childhood friend from Harvard, late in 1961: 'We thought you and Can might get together an interested group of African writers, organise a club for discussion, and use the paper as mouthpiece of the group' (n.p.).

Working together with a small committee, which counted Nadine Gordimer, Nimrod Mkele and Ian Bernhardt among its enthusiasts, Nakasa (1963a) launched the *Classic*, as its inaugural editorial declared, 'to seek African writing of merit' (3). In fact, the magazine addressed a dire need: 1960s South Africa was marked, as Walter Ehmeir (1995) has demonstrated, by a 'virtual lack of a local publishing industry catering to local literature written in English' (112). *Drum* had suspended its fiction section in 1957 and few alternatives existed. Committed writers now found a home in the *Classic*:

> Although an effort will be made to use mostly South African writing, the *Classic* will welcome and solicit contributions from writers in Africa and the rest of the world. Particularly welcome will be the work of those writers with causes to fight for, committed men and women who look at human situations and see tragedy and love, bigotry and commonsense, for what they are. (Nakasa, 1963a: 4)

With such multiracial ambitions, the little magazine reached across the divides set up by the apartheid government. 'He wanted all of us', Can Themba (1995) remembered of Nakasa's editorial prowess, 'black, white, coloured, Indian' (xviii). Looking back on the magazine's early years, Nadine Gordimer (1967) likewise found in it a political venture 'openly dedicated to the creation of a common literature' (2). What is so remarkable of these early issues of the *Classic* is that they, in turn, carved out a space for reflections on African bureaucracies: from Esk'ia Mphahlele's 'He and the Cat', set in a lawyer's office, and Doris Lessing's 'Outside the Ministry', about two African civil servants waiting outside the London Foreign Office to discuss proposals for a constitution, to Nakasa's 'Writing in South Africa' (1963b), which introduces a by-now familiar scene, of a white policeman asking a black South African for his reference book, around which 'the whole matter of writing in South Africa' spins (62). The jazz pianist Chris McGregor perhaps tested the generic boundaries between paperwork and creative writing most radically, reimagining his personal essay from an application for a cultural grant as a magazine piece for the *Classic*.

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[6] In the Cold War, the US feared that newly independent nations in Sub-Saharan Africa could otherwise become communist. Magazine patronage was one way among many of spreading propaganda for a liberal world order.

'The World of Nat Nakasa', the memorial issue dedicated to the founding editor, appeared in 1966, its cover adorned with a blown-up newspaper photograph of Nakasa lifted from his *Rand Daily Mail* column. The issue gravitates so explicitly toward Nakasa's chosen subject, the pass laws, and to his *cause célèbre*, the refusal of his passport, that it truly comes into its own as an anthology and archive of historical encounters with the state's paperwork.[7] There is an underlying impulse to revisit and record for the future the realities of a black journalist's thwarted movements as they were ironically dictated by the state's curious print artefacts. Its new editor, Barney Simon (1980), called the magazine 'a reservoir' (79). To be sure, 'The World of Nat Nakasa' reprints twenty of the author's articles, mostly from the *Rand Daily Mail*, including 'The Hazards of Too Much Education', about the pass system, 'Castles in the Air', about his passport application, and 'A Native of Nowhere', about his exit permit. Similarly, the tributes by fellow writers in the issue pivot around Nakasa's passport refusal and his subsequent exile and death, making his life emblematic of a wider issue. In her contribution, 'One Man Living Through It', Nadine Gordimer (1966b), for instance, reopens Nakasa's 'process of trying to get a passport', which, 'for an African', meant 'a year-long game in which the sporting element seems to be that the applicant is never told what you have to do to win, or what it was he did that made him lose' (15). With the game lost, Gordimer saw her friend off at the airport:

> weigh-in, customs, finally passport control and the exit permit open on the counter. I looked at it: it was valid for one exit only, and the undersigned, Nathaniel Nakasa, was debarred from entering the Republic of South Africa or South West Africa again. There was the printed admonition, 'This is a valuable document. Keep it in a safe place'. Nat was gone. He never came back. (16)

Gordimer examines the material contours of the exit permit, borrowing its legal language ('the undersigned', 'the Republic of South Africa') and quoting its admonition ('This is a valuable document. Keep it in a safe place'). These material details suggest an impulse to archive the ephemera of the state, precisely because, like Nakasa's 'pocket testament' and Achebe's 'souvenir', the exit permit was so curious and artificial an artefact. Through the little magazine, Gordimer put this moment of encounter with the state's ephemera, and the violence implied in such an encounter, on record. When, a few days after Nakasa's death, the Afrikaans poet Ingrid Jonker died of suicide, attributed to her discomfort with apartheid's politics of racial segregation, David Lytton was

[7] To be sure, it was a *cause célèbre*, reported on and discussed at length in the press, including the *Rand Daily Mail*. Writers such as Nadine Gordimer wrote to the newspaper to express their dismay.

similarly moved to turn the periodical form into an archive. His 'Ingrid Jonker Comes to Stratford', published in the Cape Town little magazine *Contrast*, records the seemingly insignificant details of Jonker's 1964 visit to the U.K., since, in Lytton's words (1967), the 'future will naturally wish to know as much as possible' about the poet (89). *Contrast*, too, had planned a memorial issue to Jonker, but so many reminiscences had been submitted that it was decided to produce a booklet instead.

William Plomer's 'The Taste of the Fruit', which had originally appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* and which was reprinted in the memorial issue of the *Classic*, can be read to a similar effect. Together with James Baldwin and Noni Jabavu, Plomer had served as a judge for the magazine's short story contest, which had put him in touch with Nakasa, whom he was never to meet in person. Comprised of short stanzas that repeat the refrain, alternately 'She is not there' and 'He is not there', 'The Taste of the Fruit' explicitly contrasts the near-simultaneous deaths of Nakasa and Jonker. The passport is a central motif in the poem:

> A man with no passport,
> He had leave to exile
> Himself from the natural
> Soil of his being,
> But none to return.
>
> She, with a passport,
> Turned great eyes on Europe,
> What did she return to?
> She found, back home, that
> She was not there. (Plomer, 1966: 6)

Movement across place and space in these two stanzas—home, exile, natural soil, Europe—is dictated by an artificial abstraction, the passport, in perhaps the same way in which the movement of these verses are dictated by the formal requirements of the poem, breaking off, artificially, in revealing enjambments, such as 'exile / himself' and 'natural / soil'.

Following these stanzas, the poem's momentum is unexpectedly broken up, interrupted by a short editorial note on an inserted blue page.[8] The note explains that Can Themba's tribute, 'The Boy with the Tennis Racquet', which begins on the verso of

[8] The issue in question is digitised by the University of the Witwatersrand and available here: http://historicalpapers-atom.wits.ac.za/classic.

the final page of Plomer's poem, had to be excised. Between printing and distribution, Themba, with whom Nakasa briefly shared a flat in Sophiatown in the late 1950s and who had been living in exile in Swaziland since 1961, was declared a statutory communist, which made the circulation of his work illegal in South Africa. Leaving the issue of the *Classic* as it was would have led to the involvement of the censors. The final stanzas of Plomer's poem were therefore retyped and, with a short note, reinserted. As the editor of the Johannesburg *Purple Renoster* once remarked, little magazines had 'a sort of elasticity' that meant that they could respond, flexibly and with little advance notice, to the political realities of publishing under apartheid (Abrahams, 1980: 32). Still, for contemporary readers, the traces of censorship remained visible—the note, the inserted blue-coloured page, the pagination leaping from 6 to 11. Mongane Serote (1995), then a young student at the University of the Witwatersrand and later himself a political exile, remembered being struck by this absence in his stolen copy of the *Classic*: 'And there was one other reality; a blue slip inside the book explained that two missing pages had been scissored out of the book because Can Themba was banned and we were not allowed to read what he had written' (xxviii).

That unexpected break in Plomer's 'The Taste of the Fruit' made the *Classic* such an affective artefact: it carried the material traces of the bureaucratic violence that marked its immediate political surroundings. In other words, the little magazine not only archived Nakasa's encounters with the passports and exit permits of the apartheid state, preserving a sense of their peculiar materiality; it in turn became what it archived, that is, a curious material artefact from the mid-apartheid years. This affective purchase, not intended though not unexpected either, suggests why the little magazine may have felt like a fitting archive, despite the paradox inherent in such a project. For the archive and the magazine have conflicting temporalities: the latter, ephemeral and precarious, exists for the now; the former, solid and permanent, exists for the future. As Laurel Brake (2012) has pointed out, editors 'had an interest in purveying the impression of the alleged "ephemerality"' of the newspaper and the periodical 'to ensure that the last issue was abandoned when its more topical and news-rich successor was "ready" for purchase' (7). Priti Joshi (2021) termed this the periodical's 'built-in obsolescence' (4). Ephemeral qualities were especially prominent in the *little* magazine, which the *Classic* was, in all the senses of the term. From the start, its challenges had been legion. As Nakasa (1963f) confided in a letter to a friend, 'putting together a paper like ours is not really uncomplicated in these parts', given that submissions had to be weighed against censorship predictions (n.p.). The first issue was, in the editor's own words, 'horribly printed'. 'Our first printer was not only the most inefficient in creation', he explained, 'he also went down with double pneumonia during press week and had to be

replaced by his son, a police detective' (Nakasa, 1963c: n.p.). Delays in publication were so common that the magazine, while conceived as a quarterly, was in fact closer to an annual. 'I sincerely hope', wrote James Matthews (1963) to the editor, from Cape Town, 'that "The Classic" is not going to take the same route as many a literary magazine has travelled with as few appearances possible' (n.p.).

In many ways, such challenges were a consequence of as well as a meta-comment on the magazine's political surroundings. Given these difficulties, then, why adopt the magazine form for this archive of apartheid ephemera? The *Classic* was Nakasa's project, so it must have felt appropriate. And the magazine was in trouble, too. 'There has been organisational chaos', the first issue of the *Classic* after Nakasa's departure announced in an editorial to its readers (Anon, 1965: 4). Before leaving, in 1964, Nakasa had asked Barney Simon and Casey Motsisi to take over the editorship, warning them that he was experiencing great difficulty in finding material. Anthologising Nakasa's already existing oeuvre, mainly from the *Rand Daily Mail*, as well as tributes, such as Plomer's and Themba's, which had appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* and *Golden City Post*, would easily fill an issue and buy the magazine much-needed time to find future original contributions. 'Material, particularly black material, was not forthcoming', Simon (1980) reminisced, looking back on his first year as editor: 'And then suddenly I had an issue, a whole issue [...]. Nadine Gordimer phoned me at work: Nat had committed suicide by jumping from a building in New York' (77).[9] Yet, such practical concerns aside, the more compelling reason for this turn to the little magazine, and not a book instead, is that its material qualities lent affective purchase to this archive: a fragile artefact curiously shaped by apartheid politics. Already in its ephemeral form—the blue slip, the leaping pagination, the delayed appearance—the *Classic* hinted at the violence of the apartheid state.

Epilogue: The Little Magazine's Shelf Lives

The issue of the *Classic* dedicated to Nat Nakasa's memory comes into its own as a form of what Karin Barber (2006) has influentially termed a 'tin-trunk' archive (3): the hoarding of precious documents such as letters, photographs, passports and other state papers, often stowed for many years in tin trunks under beds and pulled out at a later time to narrate an intimate history of a politically charged moment. Out of this issue—out of Plomer's 'The Taste of the Fruit', Gordimer's 'One Man Living Through It', Nakasa's 'Castles in the Air' and 'A Native of Nowhere'—current and

[9] Further indicative of this argument of buying more time, 'The World of Nat Nakasa' was followed by an issue entirely dedicated to Francophone African writing in translation—another way of getting around original contributions.

future readers could excavate the paperwork of the apartheid state, from passbooks and passports to applications and exit permits, examined and stored here for what they were: material curiosities. To emphasise their artificial nature in this way—like the urge to keep an immigration form as a 'souvenir' (as Achebe had done) or to hold an exit permit 'up against the light' (as Nkosi saw British immigration officials do)—is to critique the ironic gap that existed between these abstract inventions and the black lives they dictated so forcefully. Like a tin trunk stowed away, this issue of the *Classic* became itself a curious, affectively charged material artefact, whose fragile form as a little magazine lent affective legibility to this memorial. It, too, was out-of-the-ordinary: delayed, censored, with a blue slip inserted and the pagination leaping. Such material ephemerality could be put to productive use; if Nakasa's critique of apartheid lies in unearthing the curious nature of its bureaucratic ephemera—the odd-looking documents, the artificial registers—then the little magazine served as a fitting site for the preservation of this critique because its form was equally affected by the violence of the state. Barber (2006) views tin-trunk projects as 'a kind of local, do-it-yourself archiving' (2): unlike state archives in Pretoria and Bloemfontein, which are, in South Africa as elsewhere, sites of power that construct an officially sanctioned version of the past, the *Classic* gathered evidence of the violence, irony and dissent that convened around apartheid's ephemera in the wake of Sharpeville, preserving a sense of how these piles of papers affected this one individual life.[10]

For the *Classic* to be a functional archive, it had to survive, which was no mean trick for a little magazine in apartheid South Africa—indeed, a 'small miracle', as Nadine Gordimer put it (undated: n.p.). The survival of ephemera—first recorded in Nakasa's journalism, then archived in a little magazine that itself persisted against the odds—can be read, retrospectively, as a political claim against power. While the *Classic* eventually folded in 1971, individual issues survived in a range of libraries and institutions that were among early subscribers, including the J.W. Jagger Library at the University of Cape Town, Rhodes University in Grahamstown, the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford, the Bloemfontein Public Library, the Africa Institute in London and the British Museum (which demanded, and received, a free copy of each issue under the provisions of a 1916 South African Copyright Act). Additionally, in 1980, the scholarly journal *English in Africa* dedicated an issue to the little magazine in South Africa, which, its editors admitted, 'does not generally have a long life' (Anon, 1980: n.p.). Barney Simon submitted a reminiscence, 'My Years with the *Classic*: A Note'. As the editors observed,

[10] Jean-Christophe Cloutier's 'shadow archive' is another helpful term in this context. Given the lack of archival institutions dedicated to the black experience in the United States, Cloutier argues, the novel—and by extension other forms such as the little magazine—developed into an alternative site of historical preservation.

such anecdotal recollections—including by founders of *Contrast, Purple Renoster* and *Voorslag*—gathered, for future scholars, first-hand evidence towards a 'full history of the little magazine in this country' (Anon, 1980: n.p.). The most pivotal of such South African magazines, Stefan Helgesson (2022) has pointed out, were even reissued as facsimiles, 'as monuments to this least monumental form of print literature' (217).

This happened, in a sense, with the *Classic*. Its memorial issue, 'The World of Nat Nakasa', was 'rescued'. The process is common in the history of the periodical and involves, as Margaret Beetham (1989) has argued, two aspects: 'rescue into the book form, which is physically more stable' as well as 'rescue from the periodical into a recognized genre' (97). In 1975, Essop Patel, who had met Nakasa in London, edited *The World of Nat Nakasa*, which appeared with the South African anti-apartheid publisher Ravan Press. It assembled not only the writings and memories already collected in the *Classic*, but also pieces (such as Mongane Serote's) which had initially appeared in *Contrast*. Taken together, Richard Rive (1976) found it a 'fitting tribute to a wonderful human being' and, in his review in *Contrast*, was prompted once more to remember and reflect, more than ten years to date, on 'the anguish [Nakasa] was undergoing when forced to leave South Africa on an exit permit' (90). What was gained with book publication was an alternative, perhaps surer way of preserving Nakasa's encounter with the state's ephemera for the future—from the fragile pages of the little magazine into the hard covers of the bound codex. What was lost, in this process of rescue, was a sense of the affective immediacy and ephemeral materiality of the original tin-trunk archive, which was infused with larger political meaning.

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