

# FINDING VOICE, VOCABULARY AND COMMUNITY. THE UWC STUDENT MOVEMENT 1972-1976

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Only within the community has each individual the means of cultivating his gifts in all directions; hence personal freedom becomes possible only within the community.

*Karl Marx*

## **Abstract**

*This article delves into an activist vocabulary adopted by Coloured students at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in the early- to mid-1970s. It asks what language these students used to make meaningful in their solidaristic opposition to apartheid South Africa, and how they found their voice after the relative Coloured quiescence in the 1960s. The article specifically interrogates how, in the context of black consciousness, Coloured students acquired, appropriated and applied the concepts of “conscientization”, “black”, “liberation theology”, and “community”. Homing in on the period 1970 to 1976, it unfolds a student protest narrative, including the Demas tie affair (1970), SASO-UWC’s activism (1972-1974), the UWC students’ response to community (1975-1976), and the Soweto uprising (1976). It finds a new conversation and activism that found expression “in the community”. As an auto-ethnographic and qualitative narrative piece, the article scripts the unfolding of a new phenomenon in Coloured protest, one which shows a departure from an older (Non-European Unity Movement) political language and makes “audible” the student voice in community inclusive anti-apartheid activism. It shines new light on a moment in Coloured history that linked UWC students nationally and transformed the struggle in organic and instrumentalist ways.*

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**Keywords:** Conscientization; black consciousness; students; activism; protest(-s); liberation theology; community; apartheid.

**Slutelwoorde:** “Conscientization”; swartbewustheid; studente; aktivisme; betoging(-s); bevrydingsteologie; gemeenskap; apartheid.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The rector of the University of the Western Cape (UWC), Brian O’Connell, correctly wrote, in 2010, that in 1976 “UWC assumed control of the struggle in

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the Western Cape”.<sup>2</sup> But the upheaval of that year had powerful antecedents – the emergence of black consciousness and the student troubles at UWC in 1973. In fact, in the Coloured areas of greater Cape Town, students and scholars reached watershed moments in 1973 and 1976. This article interrogates student activism at UWC by looking at the new language (tools) students used, and it explores how, through a new voice and vocabulary, students in the Western Cape broadened the liberation struggle as of 1973. It argues for a Coloured “moment” wherein these students pursued a new discourse, one that transcended older modes of expression and indeed one that enriched a national conversation in the 1970s.

To start, in January 1973, signs of revolution stirred the land when a wave of strikes hit Durban in a great show of African labour power. The students who were at or first entered UWC in February 1973 knew of this upheaval. Henry Isaacs, a senior UWC law student who hailed from Pietermaritzburg, close to Durban, was inspired by it. He and fellow student Peter Lamoela attended a South African Students Organisation (SASO) conference two weeks before the strike. Another UWC student, Leonardo Appies, was on the west coast at the time. He had read the Durban news. He later became president of the UWC Student Representative Council (SRC).

Coloured students from all over South Africa and South West Africa (Namibia) attended UWC. This article explores how they used a new vocabulary and also the activist manifestations of this practice. Tangentially it considers where the UWC and indeed Coloured communities fitted into the national protest theatre. Focusing thus, thematically, this article looks at a series of events, organic and composed, dips into student tracts, and listens to their voice(s), to see how the students of the Western Cape toolled for the revolution.

## 2. UWC IN THE 1960s

The University College of the Western Cape opened its doors in terms of the Extension of University Education Act of 1959 in 1960. The UWC meant to provide tertiary education for Coloured students. The college first offered rudimentary facilities (pre-fabricated structures) in a primary school in Bellville South. Students felt cheated and disaffected. By 1963 the college had moved to a state of the art campus in the bushes southwest of Bellville South.

Critical discourse at this institution started soon after its inception, perhaps as early as 1960. Already in 1962 freshman student, Ambrose George, and a group of friends – Frank Musson from Kimberley, and August Matzimella and Raymus Cunningham from Port Elizabeth – organised themselves into a study cell in Lloyd

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2 The author, a member of the Coloured community, observed or participated in some of the events in 1975 and 1976 when he was a student at UWC.

Street, Bellville South. At this time all UWC students lodged off campus and there they held political discussions. Soon they learned about the Non-European Unity Movement and African People’s Democratic Union of Southern Africa (APDUSA), and invited non-student activists to campus and, going the other way, attended “parties” in Cape Town.<sup>3</sup>

Separately, later on, one George Botha studied at UWC in 1967-1969. He served on the first SRC.<sup>4</sup> In the latter half of the 1960s, the post-Rivonia fear and trembling kept a lid on student politics, and running for office placed Botha in an activist category. At university the security police kept an eye on him and on occasion searched his home in Port Elizabeth. He and his friends, Johnny Klassen, Bruce Simon and Jimmy Matzimela, joined a political cell ideologically close to APDUSA. Although local activist Frank van der Horst did not study at UWC, he often visited the campus to educate newly arrived students politically, to make sure they understood they were not there “just to party”.<sup>5</sup>

In 1966 the students boycotted the Republic Day celebrations. As far as could be ascertained, this was the first student protest at UWC.<sup>6</sup> The next year eleven students snubbed a speaker on Coloured culture, renowned educationist Dr Richard van der Ross, by walking out as he commenced his address.<sup>7</sup> At the same time they stood ambivalent about an institutionally recognized SRC and about the institution itself, not knowing if to embrace or reject it. At this time also, UWC students attended University Christian Movement (UCM) meetings. By 1969 they also knew of the formation of SASO, the South African Students Organization.

In 1970, the UWC suspended a student, Desmond Demas, for not wearing a tie to lectures. Years on, Demas explained: “Because of the oppression of the time [...] I expressed my frustration by deliberately challenging the dress code.”<sup>8</sup> Demas felt that the students at “white” universities could dress casually while the UWC treated the Coloured students “as children”. Students at the University of Cape Town were subjected to a similar dress code, but they ended this with a protest in 1967. A tie boycott followed. And with the Demas tie-affair, students found that activism could be fun. They wore ties with their T-shirts or as bandanas

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3 Thomas Family Papers (unprocessed), Ambrose George, unpublished autobiography, typed manuscript, p. 1.

4 Interview: Cornelius Thomas – Pralene Botha, Port Elizabeth, 12 January 1998. George Botha died in detention in Port Elizabeth on 15 December 1976.

5 Interview: Fritz Klaaste – Bruce Simon, “George Botha: gelykheid tot die dood ons skei,” Radio Sonder Grense, 16 February 2012.

6 Neither Arthur Nortjie nor Ambrose George, two of the earliest commentators of UWC student activism, mentions any protest before 1966. The author of this article could not find any instances of protest at UWC before 1966.

7 Thomas Family Papers (unprocessed), Richard van der Ross – the author, Madrid, Spain, *s.a.*

8 Desmond Demas, “The power of dignified protest”, C Thomas (ed.), *Finding freedom in the bush of books* (East London: Wendy’s Book Lounge, 2010), p. 22.

knotted tie-style. Clearly, like their UCT counterparts, UWC students also plunged into the counter-cultural rebellion that had been sweeping college campuses in the western world. The University scrapped the rule requiring the wearing of a tie. The students found that they could beat the “system” if they organised; that they could win. Moreover, the tie-incident emboldened them and “changed the political atmosphere to one of defiance”.<sup>9</sup> One student, Richard Stevens, put it: “The tie protest was historically the beginning of ideological transformation at UWC.”<sup>10</sup> The tie saga fortuitously set the UWC in a protest mood at a time when the winds of an alternate influence, black consciousness, started blowing through student ranks, albeit elsewhere.

Still, this undercurrent of disaffection placed UWC students in a state of readiness to experiment with different forms of activism. It now seems, given the benefit of hindsight, that such activism involved a new vocabulary – including the use of the concepts of “conscientization”, “black”, “liberation theology”, and “community”, and which, this article suggests, transformed UWC student politics and laid the foundation for significant change in the Western Cape.

### 3. CONSCIENTIZATION

Sometime around 1972, a curious, rather un-English word slipped into the discourse of African, Coloured and Indian students in South Africa; it especially became part of the conversation of Coloured students at the UWC. English dictionaries did not carry this word; and it did not enter them later. That word was “conscientization”. These students used it actively, as in “we must conscientize”, and as in “to conduct conscientization programmes”.

The author first heard the concept in 1973, when several expelled UWC students started teaching at Bellville South High<sup>11</sup> and other Coloured high schools. The term “conscientization” turned out to be, the author learned that year, a translation of the Portuguese word *conscientização*.

Brazilian educational theorist, Paulo Freire, popularized the concept in his 1970 text, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Photocopies of this book circulated on the UWC campus at least from 1973 till 1978.<sup>12</sup> In it Freire encourages a dialogical education and a programme of reaching out to the poor and illiterate.

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9 E-mail: C Thomas – Vernon Domingo, 10 September 2012.

10 Richard Stevens, “Peer reflections on the Desmond Demas tie affair,” Thomas, p. 24.

11 The author of this article attended Bellville South High. He was in Standard 9 in 1973. Expelled or suspended students who taught at Bellville South this year included Nicky Morgan, Charlyn Wessels and William Whittles.

12 Interview: Cornelius Thomas – Allen Grootboom, Kimberley, 1 March 2012.

In early 1972, SASO approached a Paulo Freire scholar, Anne Hope, “to train them in Freire’s method”.<sup>13</sup> Hope was also a friend of Colin Collins of the University Christian Movement. Thus she had proper “political” credentials. In a series of workshops, she unpacked the concept of conscientization. Black consciousness proponents Saths Cooper and Henry Isaacs attended. The author does not know the detail of what Hope taught, except that she greatly impressed Cooper.<sup>14</sup> It can surmised that she covered the gamut of Freirean thought.

For Freire *conscientização* meant arriving at critical consciousness through a dialogical project, an engagement with the contradictions of life to arrive at an answer. Freire writes that community engagement and dialogue required love and humility, an interactive horizontal relationship. “How can I dialogue,” he asks, “if I start from the premise that naming the world is the task of an elite [...]? How can I dialogue if I am closed to – and even offended by – the contribution of others?” This has to be followed by faith in and critical dialogue with the people.<sup>15</sup>

Freire asserts, and it seems the UWC students accepted it: “We began with the conviction that the role of man was not only to be in the world, but to engage in relations with the world – that through actions of creation and re-creation, man makes cultural reality and thereby adds to the natural world [...] We were certain that man’s relation to reality, expressed as a subject to an object, results in knowledge, which man expresses through language.”<sup>16</sup>

Secular radicals (non-religious activists) on campus readily read Freire’s *Pedagogy of the oppressed*.<sup>17</sup> The concept “conscientization” became imbedded in UWC-language in the period 1972 to 1976. Saths Cooper said that the BC activists who attended the workshop accepted “conscientization” as a revolutionary tool.<sup>18</sup> From that time the concept readily found its way into SASO publications. Riding the tilting waves of Freirean precepts, SASO now saw itself as contributing to “political, economic and social awareness and consciousness by permitting wider communication and conscientization”.<sup>19</sup>

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13 Daniel R Magaziner, *The law and the prophets: black consciousness in South Africa, 1968-1977* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2010), p. 128.

14 Interview: Cornelius Thomas – Saths Cooper, Grahamstown, 22 February 2013.

15 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), pp. 70-73.

16 Paulo Freire, *Education: the practice of freedom* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1974), p. 43.

17 Cornelius Thomas – Allen Grootboom, Kimberley, 1 March 2012.

18 Cornelius Thomas – Saths Cooper, 22 February 2013.

19 SASO, Conference Issue 1972, no. 27.

#### 4. BLACK OR BROWN?

One can accept that most Coloured people thought of themselves as different from white people and from the African majority and Indian minority. This flowed daily as a social and a cultural reality, especially for Cape Town Coloureds. If up to then some had worked towards concerted action with the rest of the oppressed people, it had been through a thrust for non-European solidarity, as sought by the Non-European Unity Movement, and with the use of the political tools of non-racialism, boycott and non-collaboration (through the SA Sports Association and SA Non-Racial Olympic Committee).

Apart from this, one must mention that when the Unity Movement waned in the 1960s (because of convictions and banning orders) a new possibility, an alternative perhaps, arose in Coloured ranks with the Government's creation of the Coloured People's Representative Council and in response formations such as the Federal Party and the Labour Party who supported that government initiative. These initiatives pursued exclusive Coloured interests. This development excited some Coloured people. The UWC students did not support it.

A number of SASO conference bulletins, newsletters and reports appeared in 1972. They explained black consciousness as "an attitude of mind, a way of life" positioning black people dialectically opposite white people and white superiority. For SASO the term "black" referred to "politically oppressed" South Africans. A rush of publications encouraged students to use the term as a tool to achieve solidarity and to challenge apartheid. Henry Isaacs practiced this use of the word as early as 1971.<sup>20</sup>

In the autumn of 1973, one Jean Swanson, a first year student at the UWC, started talking to her parents, Charles and Sophie Swanson, about "being black". Her father scoffed at this, retorting, "We're not black; we're Coloured, or brown. It's clear." Hereupon the 17-year-old Jean answered, "Well, it's not a matter of skin colour but of political identification; we are all oppressed, so we're all black."<sup>21</sup> This did not convince the elder Swansons.

From July 1973 several expelled UWC students started teaching in Cape Flats schools. Black poetry at high schools formed part of the conscientization project of the black consciousness movement. African poetry and poetry by oppressed poets became black poetry – the poetry of James Matthews, David Diop, Christine Douts, Pascal Gwala, Oscar Mtshali, etc. In black poetry, high school pupils, many of them township kids, found a new way of "reading the world" – they closely associated with the memories and experiences that spilled onto paper.<sup>22</sup> In addition, at the

20 Interview transcript: Julie Frederikse – Henry Isaacs, *s.l. s.a.*, p. 2.

21 Interview: Cornelius Thomas – Jean Swanson, Bellville South, 25 September 2011.

22 Interview: Cornelius Thomas – James Matthews, Silvertown, 17 November 2010.

same time, DramSoc (the drama society at the UWC) used theatre to conscientize students. In 1973-1974, for instance, Peter Braaf and his Cape Flats Players and DramSoc (of the UWC) performed at Bellville South High and the nearby Tiervlei-Bishop Lavis-Elsies River high schools.

Philosopher and poet Adam Small,<sup>23</sup> a patron of SASO, also used poetry to conscientize. In Afrikaans! His was not the language of the elite (that is, the *algemeen beskaafde Afrikaans* of the academy<sup>24</sup>) but the language of the street, as his plays *Joanie Galant-hulle* and *Kanna hy kô hystoe* and several poetry anthologies show.<sup>25</sup> Small stepped forward as the first Coloured academic to alert budding activists of “community”, this first through his poetry and later, in the early 1970s, with his lectures. Through his poetry he forced them to wander, intellectually at first but later in deed, into squatter camps such as Windermere and Cook’s Bush.

Small could also claim to be the first Coloured intellectual who identified himself as black. Importantly, he embraced blackness in Afrikaans. As such, the first black consciousness adherents in the Western Cape were Afrikaans-speaking Coloureds.

In 1975 a UWC sociologist, CJ Groenewald, employing the Bogardus social distance scale, found that UWC students identified most strongly with black groups and least with Afrikaners.<sup>26</sup> This was both a reactive (against the oppressor) and pro-active identification (solidarity in carrying out the liberation struggle). In addition, he found *toenemende gemeenskapsbelang* (increasing interest in community) among Coloured students. This finding might be considered a political bombshell. After all, almost all Coloureds, even in the rural stretches of the land, had heretofore identified with whites – some on the basis of genetic make-up, others because of cultural practice.<sup>27</sup> Black consciousness had a lot to do with this new attitude among students.

This growing black affinity showed in July 1976 when the UWC Social Sciences Society (SSS) wanted to conduct a Saturday symposium on the future of the Coloureds. In a mass meeting attended by about 500 students SRC president Leonardo Appies was the main spokesperson. As representatives of the student body, he explained, the SRC expected an outreach to the black community, with which it sought solidarity. Appies berated the SSS, saying: “We as a black campus

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23 Adam Small was a philosophy lecturer at UWC. In 1973 he openly sided with the students.

24 “Algemeen Beskaafde Afrikaans” could be roughly translated as “generally acceptable civilized Afrikaans”.

25 See Adam Small, *Sê sjibollet* (Johannesburg: Perskor, 1963) and Adam Small, *Kitaar my kruis* (Kaapstad: HAUM, 1973).

26 *Unibel* 1 and 2, August 1975, p. 1.

27 One should note that in 1994 67% of Coloureds voted for the National Party. This might indicate what Groenewald found, constituted a temporary instrumentalist (political) reversal of attitude, and one found mostly among students.

cannot be so narrow-minded as to concern ourselves exclusively with a Coloured struggle.”<sup>28</sup> Appies summarily suspended the constitution of the SSS. Although layers of identity and political persuasion existed among the UWC students, no one in the mass meeting opposed the measure meted out to the SSS. This incident suggests that the UWC accepted the black approach, albeit not unanimously. In the period between Isaacs (1973) and Appies (1976), the UWC became a black campus, with many students identifying themselves as black.

## 5. LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Liberation theology had been around a while by the early 1970s.<sup>29</sup> However, it was neither the most prominent discourse on campus and nor did theology students (*tokkelokke*) step to the fore to assume student leadership positions, this up to 1973. Black theology, an African-American variant of Latin American liberation theology, one can perhaps assume, nudged the *tokkelokke* closer to black consciousness.

Debate existed at the nexus between *tokkelokke* and secular radicals. Allen Grootboom, a secular radical close to the theology group, recalled that the key message that flowed from the *tokkelokke* towards them could be said to be that “God was on the side of the oppressed and you as a Christian could not remain apolitical”. He added that “James Cone’s book, *God of the oppressed*, became our handbook”.<sup>30</sup> Elsewhere, Grootboom loosely quoted Gustavo Gutiérrez: “We can say that all political theologies, the theologies of hope, of revolution and liberation, are not worth one act of genuine solidarity with the exploited social classes. They are not worth one act of faith, love and hope, committed – in one way or another – in active participation to liberate man from everything that dehumanises him and prevents him from living according to the will of the Father.” Then, in 1976, he added, the debates “centred on social justice issues and that we could not sit and pray that the country would change. We had to make change happen.”<sup>31</sup>

One of the leaders of the class of 1973’s secular radicals, Kenny Mathews, said that in the wake of the 1973 unrest: “The mantle of leadership was consciously and deliberately given to the *tokkelokke*. We believed that their leadership would give the struggle an acceptable face and at the same time deflect attention from the hard core secular activists.”<sup>32</sup>

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28 Cornelius Thomas, *Cocktails of liberty* (Cape Town: South African History Online and Vivlia, 2008), p. 45.

29 The activist priest Gustavo Gutiérrez coined the phrase in 1971, but the ideas contained in this theological approach to issues of poverty and injustice evolved as of 1955 when Catholic priests spearheaded and established the Latin American Episcopal Conference.

30 Cornelius Thomas – Allen Grootboom, 1 March 2012.

31 Grootboom, “A decade and more of activism at UWC”, *Finding freedom*, p. 109.

32 Interview: Cornelius Thomas – Kenny Mathews, Kimberley, 1 March 2012.



Post-1973 the VCS or *Vereniging van Christen Studente* became the most vibrant student body at the UWC. To an extent it became an intra-institutional home for liberation theology. In it the *tokkelokke* held sway – Russell Botman, Abe Visagie, James Buys, Willa Boesak, Peter Gelderbloem, Nico Botha, and of course Leonardo Appies. It was also the student organization most connected to kindred associations in South Africa. Coloured students from all over South Africa belonged to it.

As of 1976, Allan Boesak, fresh from his studies in the Netherlands and New York, started playing a prominent role in linking liberation theology to black consciousness. Copies of his seminal text in this regard, *A farewell to innocence*, circulated openly on campus. The key message placed God on the side of the oppressed. The students began to appreciate that white clergymen generally misrepresented God's son Jesus. As Andy Gradwell, a member of the Open Dialogue Society at UWC, put it: there never existed “a white, blue-eyed Jesus”, but rather a “revolutionary Jesus who walked the dusty pathways of Palestine and challenged those in power and their doctrinal conservatism”.<sup>33</sup>

It seems that with the VCS in place, a coterie of budding liberation theologians at study, and a charismatic lecturer (Boesak) leading from the front, the student leadership would naturally pass to the theology students. Mathews added: “We gave the UWC student leadership an acceptable face, while retaining the revolutionary intentions of the broader student movement.”<sup>34</sup> In quick succession three *tokkelokke* took charge of student affairs – Richard Stevens (1973-1974), Howard Eybers (1975), and Leonardo Appies (1976).

Liberation theology, as articulated by them, gave the students a moral high ground, a Christian position with which they could live; it gave them thoughtful leaders, perhaps most prominently Leonardo Appies.

Moreover, the adoption of these ideological cum linguistic tools indicates the further marginalization of the Unity Movement and APDUSA, this despite the fact that some of the students in the 1960s clearly leaned in that ideological direction. As it were, the Non-European Unity Movement remained completely eclipsed until 1985 when it re-emerged as the New Unity Movement.

## 6. SASO, UWC AND COMMUNITY

The ideas of conscientization, newfound black solidarity, and the moral high ground of “God on the side of the poor” cohered strongly in the realm of “community”. As such, it is necessary to consider student involvement in community expansively.

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33 Thomas Family Papers, unprocessed, Andy Gradwell, “My Wild West activism at UWC”, notes, *s.l., s.a.*

34 Cornelius Thomas – Kenny Mathews, 1 March 2012.

Black consciousness spoke about community since its first steps; liberation theology insisted on responsibility towards “exploited social classes”; Adam Small took new ideas and style of language and gave it to the people. The students used “community” synonymously with “the people” or “the oppressed” or “society”. Also, the fact that student activists worked in townships and squatter camps, as we shall see, suggests the concept could be roughly equivalent to “working class” also.

As early as 1963 the poet Arthur Nortje predicted that “the college is bound to become the centre of cultural and sporting activities for the ‘Coloured’ community of the Western Cape”.<sup>35</sup> This did in fact happen in the 1970s, for example with the UWC rugby football club affiliated to unions in communities near the campus – Bellville South, Tiervlei, Elsies River. But first a link was established between university and community, with the political and social programmes flowing from the side of the students.

About two years after black students had founded SASO. Steve Biko, addressing the organization’s leadership at the its 1<sup>st</sup> National Formation School in Edendale on 1 December 1971, said: “We have a responsibility not only to ourselves but also to the society [community] from which we spring. No one else will ever take the challenge up until we, of our own accord, accept the inevitable fact that ultimately the leadership of the non-white peoples in this country rests with us.” He included among the aims of SASO the shaping of the black political thinking.<sup>36</sup>

The SASO constitution spoke broadly of the challenges facing blacks generally, rather than only black students, and committed SASO “to the realization of the worth of the black man, the assertion of his human dignity and to promoting consciousness and self-reliance of the black community”.<sup>37</sup> The aims of SASO included getting students to “become involved in the political, economic and social development of the Black people” and “to become a platform for the expression of black opinion”.

One thus see by 1973 word circulating that Coloured students had begun to see themselves as black rather than Coloured, wanted to go out into their communities to do conscientization work in order to empower the people and to transform South Africa.

As part of community development, SASO conducted literacy programmes and a “Home Education Scheme”. SASO had in fact taken over the literary programme from the University Christian Movement in 1972. These activists saw literacy playing an important role in “bringing the Black community closer to liberation”. SASO appointed a director of literacy to “plan, execute and set up literacy classes throughout the country”, and urged students to “play their

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35 Arthur Nortje, “Down at bush – the students”, *New Nation*, July 1964.

36 Donald Woods, *Biko* (London: Penguin, 1987), pp. 5 and 7.

37 SASO Constitution.

role in the sensitizing [conscientizing] of our community”. The home education scheme intended to provide adult education for the barely literate and tuition for correspondence school students by running classes near universities and vacation schools in selected centres.<sup>38</sup>

During a tour of black campuses in early-1973, Biko noticed the “eagerness of the students [...] to relate whatever is done to their situation in the community”.<sup>39</sup> About the same time, Henry Isaacs, referring to an academic freedom demonstration at the University of Cape Town, dismissed the struggle for academic freedom, explaining: “We [as students] had a far more important obligation to the black community at large and that what we should begin to do is to look at ways and means of fulfilling our obligations to that community.”

## 7. COMMUNITY AND CONSCIENTIZATION 1972-1976

In July 1972 SASO Western Cape reported to the 3<sup>rd</sup> General Students Council that “the branch has at present 120 members while the majority of the 1226 students on campus subscribe to the policies of SASO even though we are not centrally affiliated,” adding that it had embarked on “intensive and extensive conscientization at Bush, Hewat and at high schools”.<sup>40</sup> They also contemplated community programmes. Here, one expects the students took a leaf out of Freire’s *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, wherein he explicates the concept of *conscientização*. Events soon overtook them, and at the same time nudged them toward community in ways not anticipated.

Henry Isaacs had a gentle way of opening students’ eyes. He spoke to any student anywhere, whether first-year or post-graduate. He practised conscientization by showing, not telling. In 1973 the battle about the legitimacy of the SRC at the UWC raged and headed for the courts, the students being the applicants. But the student leadership had no money. One innocuous morning Isaacs asked a freshman, one Jean Swanson, to enter a debutante ball to raise funds for the court case. She declined when she heard that it involved “politics”, saying her father had told her if she became involved in politics she would end up on Robben Island.<sup>41</sup> Isaacs told Swanson he wanted to show her something that might change her mind about politics. She said yes and he drove her to Kreefgat, a squatter camp near Elsie’s River that hid a mess of humanity. The flies around the eyes of poverty and the fetid filth rising damp and dark between the shacks which Swanson saw that day

38 SASO Conference Bulletin, 1972b, 27; SASO Conference Bulletin, 1973a, pp. 15-16.

39 Steve Biko, *I write what I like* (Oxford, 1978), p. 18.

40 William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Report, Western Cape SASO Local Branch to the 3<sup>rd</sup> General Students Council, 1972.

41 Interview: Cornelius Thomas – Jean Swanson, 20 July 2011.

converted her to the cause of fighting poverty, exploitation and oppression.<sup>42</sup> The hour she sat there, observing the utterly abject, turned out to be “a life changing experience” for her.<sup>43</sup> This was one of the communities the students spoke of, one that had to be conscientized toward liberation from the oppressor, she realised.

Isaacs relates: “We began to organise regular leadership training seminars for high school students in different parts of the Cape Flats and we began to inculcate in them not only the idea of all persons who were not white being subjected to a common oppression [but also] that all of us had grown up under the system and that we had known whites only as oppressors.”<sup>44</sup> Some of the leadership proceeded to teach “unqualified” in Cape Flats schools, among them Nicky Morgan, Charlyn Wessels and William Whittles. They turned the heads of high schoolers, conscientizing them to consider alternatives, to arm themselves with black speak, so to speak, and to hold themselves up as future community leaders.

Also in 1973, activist Cecyl Esau, then in high school in Worcester, attended the mass meetings the UWC students held in his home town, Worcester. Years on, speaking about this, he said: “The response we received from the people and their perceptions of the political situation in our country made a lasting impression on me. It was clear to me that the vast majority of the people were vehemently opposed to the apartheid system but had yet to realise how to fight that system.”<sup>45</sup> In the same speech Esau said that he “became aware that the students from the oppressed community, being more critical, had an important role to play in making other layers of our society more aware of the injustices in our land and the need to transform our society into one free from apartheid and exploitation”. In other words, in operating in the community, they had to conscientize the people. In 1973, when the UWC students protested a host of grievances and faced suspension or expulsion, they took their case to their communities. One off-campus meeting to inform “the community” took place in the Congregational Church Hall on Samuel Street, Sarepta in mid-June, 1973. Johnny Issel, long-haired and looking tired, led this meeting.<sup>46</sup>

Shortly after, when the UWC students found themselves on the run from the security police, they moved living places with ease, sometimes in musical chairs fashion. People “in the community” readily accommodated them in this perilous period. Charles Swanson, one of Bellville South’s community leaders and owner of

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42 Jean Swanson-Jacobs, “Unsung hero helped transform UWC terrain”, *Cape Times*, 2 October 2009.

43 Jean Swanson later became Deputy Minister of Social Welfare in the cabinet of Thabo Mbeki.

44 Interview transcript: Julie Frederikse – Henry Isaacs, *s.l. s.a.*, p. 10.

45 Cecyl Esau, Accused No. 11 Cecil Esau [Speech from the Dock], Cape High Court, June 1987.

46 The author of this article attended this meeting as a Standard 9 pupil.

Swanie's Inn, found their children "at risk" so he helped where he could. A year on, he spirited his daughter Jean out of the country.<sup>47</sup>

The period after the 1973 walk-off proved a difficult time for Isaacs and his comrades. He found himself banned to Pietermaritzburg; security police detained Johnny Issel. Vernon Domingo hastened into exile. The UWC expelled scores. Without a university to anchor them, the remaining activists' work suffered. It is not clear if SASO as organization was banned on the UWC campus in 1974, but no activism could be detected that year. Upon application for re-admission in 1975, said one expellee: "I had to give a pledge that I was not 'an infiltrator from SASO'."<sup>48</sup>

In 1975, SASO-UWC, having declined in 1974 because of the 1973 debacle when the entire student leadership was expelled, made its move to re-insert itself into campus politics. They embarked on a conscientization programme. They roped in Thami Zani a Turfloop SASO-man, who led a revolutionary planning workshop in 1975. Coloured students attended the workshop and became "conscientized" to the need for revolution from below, that is, from community level.

Following on Freire, the UWC activist-lecturer, Ikey van der Rheede, speaking in 1976, put it that "the goal of education cannot simply be to know the 'object' or the world, but it also has to influence and change it".<sup>49</sup> Van der Rheede suspected a distancing between "the [black] intellectuals and the masses of the people", an emerging elitism, and said, "These intellectuals, who possess their knowledge because of the people, should be responsible and accountable to their communities. That is where they belong. Black intellectuals should dedicate themselves to their people and should endeavour to solve problems with them [...] In short, the responsibility of the black intellectual is not theorizing, but social action." The "project", at least for Van der Rheede, sought meaningful engagement between the elitist student body and the commoners in the community.

## 8. SQUATTER COMMUNITIES

An aerial photo would have shown that in 1973-1976 the UWC basked as a relatively well-resourced green oasis in a sandy shack-land of poverty. Three sprawls of rusty shanties – Snake Park, Werkgenot and Modderdam, communities without running water, electricity, roads, or flush-toilets – surrounded the university. And not far off, clinging to the northeastern edge of Bellville South, lay Plakkies Kamp.

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47 Cornelius Thomas – Jean Swanson, 20 July 2011.

48 *Ibid.*, 11 September 2011.

49 Thomas Family Papers, unprocessed, Ikey van der Rheede, "Present realities in black education". A mimeographed symposium paper delivered at UWC, 5 August 1976.

Having embraced the idea of community, and revolution for that matter, a fortuitous shift in human demography – the spill of a mass of Coloured and African people into greater Cape Town as of the mid-1960s and the attendant housing challenges – presented UWC students with a virtual laboratory for community activism. By 1975, about 15 000 people lived in a squatter sprawl named Snake Park on the other side of the tracks from the the UWC; another 5 000 lived in nearby Werkgenot behind the university rugby fields. Snake Park on the southern (Belhar) side of the railway line skirting the UWC housed mostly Coloured people, but many Africans crowded into it too; Werkgenot housed only Africans.

An uncounted number of Coloureds lived in Plakkies Kamp to the east of Bellville South. In attempting to alleviate the plight first of this “camp” (in 1974) and later of Werkgenot and Snake Park (in 1975), UWC students worked in soup kitchens funded by Coloured entrepreneur Charles Swanson.<sup>50</sup> The inn served as a popular drink-and-dance place on Modderdam Road, Bellville South. Swanson and his student waiters and staff helped out at Plakkies Kamp, providing soup and blankets. The students hurled themselves into these initiatives, learning more about the plight of one of the local communities, and, one imagine, steeling their resolve for activism in the process. In these efforts, the students themselves became conscientized. Grootboom provides context: “When we left one mass meeting, we went into Bellville South. For the first time I really saw the conditions of our people. [...] I saw the squalor under which our people lived; the small matchbox houses. This reminded me of a song we sang at student gatherings, particularly one by Joan Baez – Little Boxes.”<sup>51</sup> When rumour reached lecture halls in August 1975 that the African squatter camp of Werkgenot was about to be bulldozed, “hundreds of students [...] rushed to their aid”.<sup>52</sup>

Of Modderdam again one researcher found: “Life [...] moved to a rhythm common to poor people. Weekdays, most men worked and women who did not wash, cook or clean for whites did their own housekeeping or visited the hospital. On Saturdays they went shopping and ended up drinking. Some men went off to the racetrack at Milnerton, a few miles away. Sundays were for church, the community meetings and visiting.”<sup>53</sup> In 1976 and 1977, a band of UWC students, led by Allan Liebenberg, attended the Modderdam community meetings. They also slapped shanties together, dug drainage furrows and generally helped the people.

Ordinarily, Coloured people would have been eager to separate from Africans. Not so for poor Coloureds – particularly those who live in Snake Park

50 Cornelius Thomas – Jean Swanson, 20 July 2011. Interview: Cornelius Thomas – Godfrey Crowster, 21 April 2012.

51 Thomas Family Papers, unprocessed, Allan Grootboom, handwritten notes, *s.l.*, *s.a.*

52 *Unibel* 1 and 2, August 1975, p. 6.

53 Andrew Silk, *A shanty town in South Africa: the story of Modderdam* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1981), p. 9.

and Modderdam in 1973-1977. The Coloured squatters who lived cheek by jowl with the Africans saw their struggles as the same. Student activists encouraged this “black” solidarity.

## 9. THE UWC INTO THE COMMUNITY

From 1973 to 1976 the UWC students held a host of mass meetings, this as opposed to the rest of the 1960s when almost nothing happened. “The meetings [also took place] off campus in suburbs [*sic.*] such as Athlone, Elsies River, Bonteheuwel, Belhar and Bellville [South], the students were conscientizing the community about the evils of the apartheid regime. These meetings were attended by people from all walks of life. An important factor that directed the movement in the Cape [...] were the Coloured students of the University of the Western Cape. They went out to their communities and informed them what was happening at the university specifically and in South Africa on a broader scale.”<sup>54</sup>

In 1975, UWC’s Social Sciences Society, headed by Joe Hartzenburg, Derek Gysman and Keith Aiken placed “community” squarely before the students. Referring to Shawco (a UCT student fundraising and welfare outfit), Gysman, a social work student, is quoted in a student paper as saying: “The white universities are already working among our people, but what do we as black students at UWC do? We sit with folded arms and blame everything on the political situation in the country.”<sup>55</sup> The SSS itself had recently embarked on community projects on the Cape Flats and also invited several community experts to speak on campus. Other student bodies responded. The SRC headed by Howard Eybers, a *tokkelok*, started an Extra Lessons Scheme. Bellville South High, around a clump of trees and a bend from the university, benefited from this project. The same issue of *Unibel* reports that students also linked up with BABS (Build a Better Society) to make a contribution to “community development”. BABS had been established in April 1973 and some UWC social work students did their practical work with this organization. Then, also in 1975, UWC students implemented an initiative to organize and uplift the Kewton community. This involved physical labour—neatening gardens and removing trash and debris. Thus the students linked community and university.

The students regularly held meetings in the (Moravian Church) Saaltjie on Fourie Street in Bellville South in 1975-76. In the latter year, after the disruptions of lectures on campus on 9 August, the UWC SRC created several cells to work in the community.<sup>56</sup> The Kuils River cell held public meetings in St George’s

54 Grootboom, “A decade and more of activism at UWC”, Thomas, *Finding freedom*, p. 110.

55 *Unibel* 1(1), June 1975, p. 4.

56 Thomas, *Cocktails of liberty*, p. 113.

Anglican Church on Sarepta Road and fundraisers (film shows) in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church hall on Mission Road. House meetings took place at 60 Sarepta Road and 23 Gertrude Street in Sarepta. This cell distributed inflammatory pamphlets also.<sup>57</sup> These students indeed took their struggle into the community. Local businessman James Flowers quietly funded the coterie of activists in Sarepta. Francois van Wyk found that UWC students came to Bellville South High and conducted *leerskole* [schools of learning] after hours “to conscientize us”.<sup>58</sup> This happened in other Cape Flats schools also.

## 10. INSTITUTIONAL: THE UWC AND THE COMMUNITY

Institutionally, the UWC also reached into the “community”. Firstly, as rector, Richard van der Ross bent the university toward community. In an address to the incoming freshman class of 1975 he said: “It seems to me that we should begin to think of the day when the blessings of our institution should be extended to all students who wish to have access to them.” He meant students from the working class also. He added: “Waar die universiteite vir blankes soveel aandag bestee aan die keuringsproses wat daarop gemik is om kandidate wat ontoereikend toegerus is af te keur, moet ons aksent liever val op pogings om die leerlinge wat goeie potensiaal het, maar wat weens omgewingsomstandighede nie die universiteit bereik nie, in te bring.”<sup>59</sup> As such, even if unacknowledged, Van der Ross pioneered transforming UWC into the University of the Working Class.

UWC, having recognised a sub-culture of poverty on the Cape Flats,<sup>60</sup> formed the Institute for Social Development, headed in 1976 by Edna van Harte. The institute had a community improvement mandate. However, in the case of Modderdam it played an interventionist relief role also, providing food, support and advice. This came with the blessing of the rector, Van der Ross – even though the students thought of him as conservative, worse and an apartheid puppet. Van der Ross had been involved in “community outreach” even before he took the rector’s seat at UWC, and well before the students started including “community” in their protest agenda. The students’ community outreach and that of the university,

57 The author of this essay was the leader of the Kuils River cell. See one such pamphlet in Thomas, *Cocktails of liberty*, pp. 122-123.

58 Interview: Cornelius Thomas – Francois van Wyk, Kuils River, 7 January 1997.

59 UNISA Archives, University of the Western Cape Accession, Dr Richard E van der Ross, Address, “Facing the future / Die pad vorentoe”. Translation: “Whereas the universities for whites employ a selection process that is aimed at denying poorly qualified applicants admission, we should instead endeavour to admit students who have good potential but are hampered by social factors.”

60 From his “Coloured culture” lecture in 1967 to 1976, Van der Ross believed that the sub-culture of poverty that assailed Coloured people had to be addressed through community development.



although running along different trajectories, aimed at achieving the uplift of community.

## 11. SYMPOSIUM 1976

Shortly after the Soweto uprising in 1976, the UWC students plunged into a series of symposia to analyse the South African socio-political situation. Students divided into groups of about 200 and discussed assigned topics in various campus venues.

The weeklong symposia produced several reports, one of which was titled “The role of the black student”. Vernon Balie led this group discussions. This report asserts in its opening line that: “We belong to the community from whence we sprung, and only thereafter are we students.” It puts that “The student is the most critical member of any community. This emanates from the knowledge he or she is acquiring. This knowledge enables him and her to identify irregularities in the system. And as such it is the responsibility of these critical students to explain to the people so that they can clearly see the irregularities, frauds, subterfuges and frustrations of the system that plague them all.” The paper calls on students to make sacrifices and to live in the community as a critic. “Our best chance of remaining organically part of the community is to jealously resist the temptation to grow away from our community because of our erudition, to guard against the odium of superiority which we sometimes unthinkingly take up *vis-à-vis* our working class communities, because that way we will never be an asset to our parents and others.”<sup>61</sup>

A few days later, James Buys, a *tokkelok*, speaking on “solidarity”, asserted that in order to achieve “practical solidarity” the students had to involve “the whole community in our struggle”. In another report titled “The individual and the group”, fellow student Vernon Balie clarified, saying: “Our solidarity should be aimed at involving everyone from within our oppressed communities, even the non-critical person.”<sup>62</sup> He explained that if the government got hold of non-critical persons, they could be turned against their own community.<sup>63</sup> He added that: “Solidarity must also be inculcated amongst those in the broader community. We as students must stimulate our people to critical thought [that is, ‘conscientize’ them] so that they’d be able to further articulate whatever ideas we share with them.”

The obverse of Balie’s assertion must be taken into account, of course. In an address to UWC students in August 1976, lecturer Ikey van der Rheede encouraged introspection, saying: “We as a black community has in fact separated into two

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61 Thomas Family Papers, unprocessed, Vernon Balie, “Die individu en die groep”, UWC-SRC symposium report, Bellville South, 1976.

62 Thomas, *Cocktails of liberty*, p. 66.

63 Balie, “Die individu en die groep”.

groups – the intellectuals and the masses of the people. These black intellectuals have arrogated themselves a privileged status, and in fact live worlds apart from the people. This self-distancing of the black intellectuals while they continue their pompous yet meaningless conversation is counter-revolutionary.”<sup>64</sup>

Both the student leaders and Van der Rheede here in effect urged a break with the old ivory tower conception of a university, transforming it into a dynamic and meaningful player in advancing community. They thus envisaged a revolutionary university, a socially involved institution bent on breaking down separations and bringing about a semblance of social levelling.

Having so armed themselves, the students led the uprising in 1976, taking it visibly onto Modderdam Road (the arterial road passing the university) and into various Cape Flats townships. African and Coloured high school pupils came on board. On 2 September thousands of Coloured students and pupils took over the Cape Town city centre.<sup>65</sup> This constituted the largest demonstration the mother city had seen since Philip Kgosana’s march on Caledon Square in 1960.

## 12. CONCLUSION

The voicing of the vocabulary of “conscientization”, “black”, and “liberation theology” led UWC students into “community”. This fresh discourse energised them. The new language swept students into action and transformed at least some of them into organic intellectual activists. Considering that Coloured students grew up on a staple of Christian National Education, their acceptance of these “foreign” and self-constructed concepts constituted something ranking with the revolutionary. By 1976, the new vocabulary provided them with a basis for solidarity and action.

They did perhaps not see that these concepts (ideological tools) had their dialectical antitheses – for these did not surface in the literature and conversation informing this essay. Just as well, the students might argue, as such recognition may have retarded their forward movement into engagements of self with black brothers and sisters. It might have slowed down students then already (in 1976) hurtling headlong into confrontation and conflict with the oppressive.

Students at the UWC made intellectually activist statements. In the period 1960 to 1972 they struggled to find their voice; but after 1972, they found it and a new language also. And this vocabulary as tools of struggle, swept them into the national conversation and, one would suggest, it expanded the struggle.

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64 Van der Rheede, “Present realities in Higher Education for blacks,” Thomas, *Cocktails of liberty*, p. 92.

65 Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Riots at Soweto and elsewhere from the 16<sup>th</sup> June 1976 to the 28<sup>th</sup> February, RP55/80, Pretoria, Government Printer, 1980. See also *Cape Herald*, 7 September 1976; *Daily Dispatch*, 8 September 1976.

The years 1973 through 1976 suggest that the conversation about the ways and means (black solidarity as political instrument) to achieve progressive change, the mobilization of self and “the people” out of the fatalism of making do under the apartheid state (conscientization), and the making visible of the rights movement where it mattered (in the community) emanated from reflection and debate in a new language, and action. The classes of Henry Isaacs and Leonardo Appies brought the UWC into history, and by extension it brought Coloured Cape Town dramatically into the anti-apartheid narrative.

This article firmly suggests, then, that what made a difference in the Western Cape during the period 1973 through 1976 was the ready use of the linguistic tools of the movement – “conscientization”, “black”, “liberation theology” and “community”. This new discourse replaced the Unity Movement’s political tools of boycott, non-collaboration and non-racialism as the sharp points of struggle. What is not sure is if the students went to the community with humility or with the arrogance of “we know better” (as feared by Van der Rheede).

The moment of awakened Coloured student activism and the finding of a new voice sustained itself throughout the 1970s and 1980s, spawning the 1980 Cape Town uprising, for instance. That’s why Brian O’Connell could write that the “UWC was magnificent in the struggle” and “its history, in fact, parallels that of our nation: it liberated both politically and intellectually”.<sup>66</sup>

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66 Brian O’Connell, “Foreword”, Thomas, *Finding freedom*, pp. x-xi.